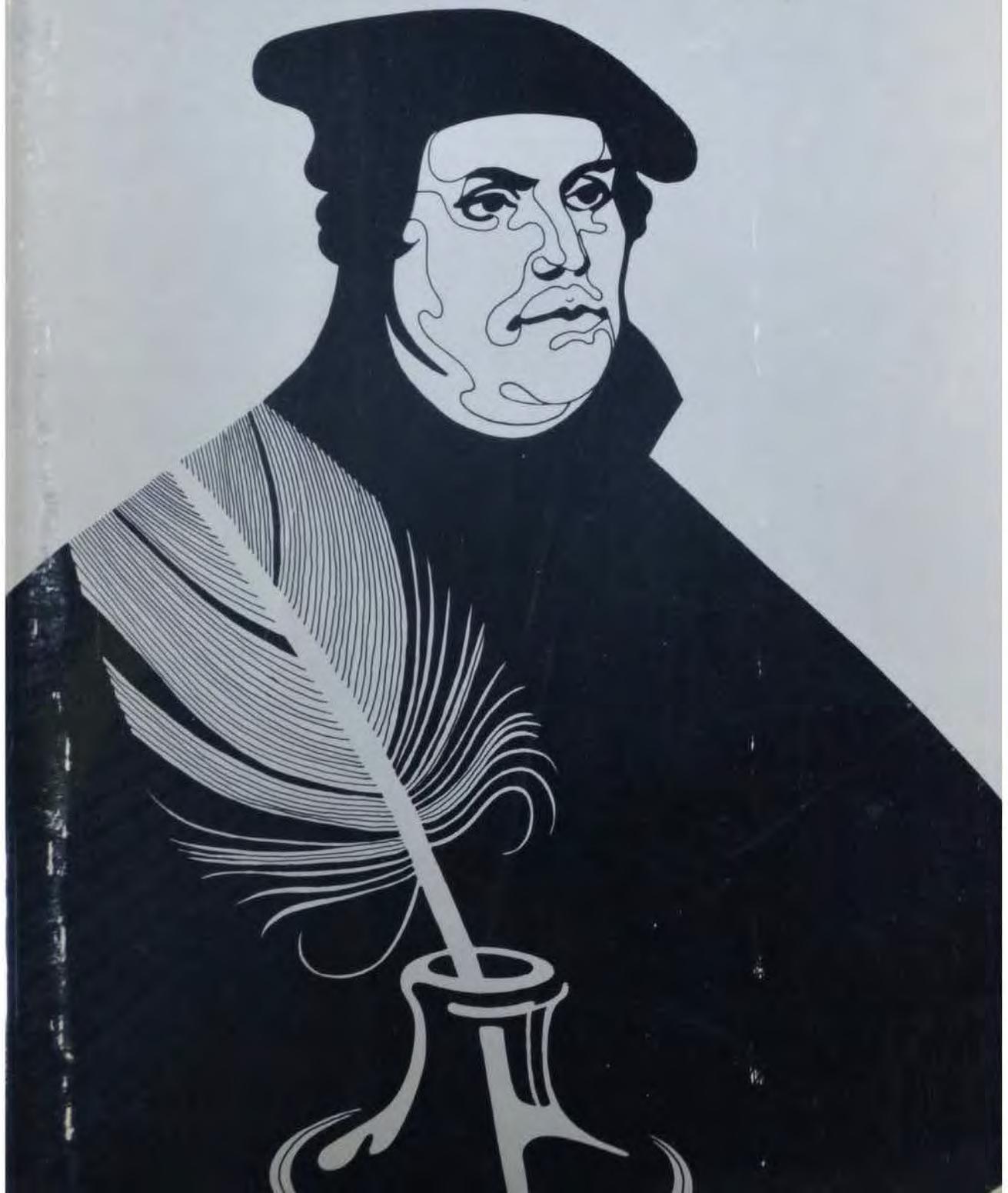


W. M. Laideen

Martin Luther's
Religious Thought



Thoughts of a Religious Rebel

"The greatest disturber of religious peace and troubler of established church institutions in the sixteenth century was Martin Luther, a religious rebel." So writes the author of this fresh and penetrating look into the beliefs of a man who so tremendously influenced the course of modern history.

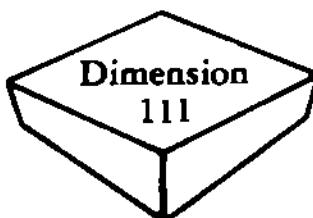
Author William M. Landeen is impressively qualified to write on Luther. Growing up in Lutheran Sweden, he voraciously read everything he could about the great Reformer; and he has been reading Luther or works on Luther ever since. In America at the University of Michigan he earned his doctoral degree in late Medieval scholasticism, which he studied in order to understand the background of Luther's thought and theology. Since then he has taught Reformation history for more than thirty years at various universities.

From 1943 to 1946 he served as a United States Army officer in Germany and since has traveled and studied extensively in that and other Reformation lands.

Dr. Landeen has written articles on the Reformation and its background in such journals as *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, *Church History*, *Blätter für Württembergische Kirchengeschichte*, and *Andrews University Seminary Studies*.

"Every aspect of Luther's thought is now being scrutinized and reinterpreted," Dr. Landeen writes. "The contemporary ecumenical movement is forcing a restudy of Luther's position on points of doctrine."

This volume seeks to acquaint the general reader with Luther's central doctrines, to let Luther speak his convictions regardless of inconsistencies, paradoxes, or exaggerations.



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by William M. Landeen

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Abbreviations

EA—*D. Martin Luthers saemtliche Werke.* 67 vols. (Erlangen, 1826-1857). The well-known Enders Edition of Luther's works.

Bondage—*The Bondage of the Will*, by Martin Luther. Tr. by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: J. Clarke Co., 1957).

Romans—*Luther: Lectures on Romans.* Tr. by W. Pauck in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XV (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

RW ML—*Reformation Writings of Martin Luther.* 2 vols. Tr. by B. L. Woolf. (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952, 1956).

WA—*D. Martin Luthers Werke.* Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar 1883-). The critical edition of all of Luther's writings nearly completed. Generally quoted as WA.

WA Br—*D. Martin Luther Werke.* Briefwechsel (Weimar, 1930-1948). The letters of Martin Luther in thirteen volumes; a part of WA.

WA TR—*D. Martin Luthers Werke.* Tischreden (Weimar, 1912-1921). The famous Table Talk of Luther in six volumes; also part of WA.

WA DB—*D. Martin Luthers Werke.* Deutsche Bibel (Weimar, 1906-). Luther's German Bible in the WA; still in process of being edited.

LW—*Luther's Works.* American Editon. 55 vols. in progress. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press; St. Louis: Concordia).

WML—*Works of Martin Luther.* 6 vols. (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Co., 1915-1932). Good American edition.

Preface

The greatest disturber of religious peace and troubler of established church institutions in the sixteenth century, an era marked by the appearance of religious and secular rebels and rebellions in various places and lands in Western Europe, was Martin Luther, a religious rebel.

His only resource, as he pointed out so often, was Holy Scripture. All his acts were grounded in one Book, the Bible. He once likened it to a mighty forest where he had personally shaken every tree. He rejoiced in the conviction that his ideas and beliefs were all anchored in the Bible, and he assured his public repeatedly that the Word needed only to be preached and read, and it would change and rectify evil practices wherever it might enter. The Word would do everything.

Luther, then, was a religious thinker. What did he think?

This is, believe it or not, a much-debated question. Every aspect of Luther's thought is now being scrutinized and reinterpreted. The contemporary ecumenical movement is forcing a restudy of Luther's position on points of doctrine. Roman Catholic scholarship has begun to interest itself positively in Martin Luther and is making notable contributions toward a new understanding of him.

The present volume seeks to acquaint the general reader with what may be presumed to represent Luther's central doctrines. It is not a complete study of his thought, nor is it a detailed analysis of any one of his doctrines. It does seek, however, to inform the general reader as to what the Reformer said on the various topics presented. The aim is definitely to let Luther speak his convictions regardless of inconsistencies, paradoxes, or exaggerations.

The critical apparatus, so much in evidence in Luther studies, has been

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reduced to a minimum. It consists chiefly of references to available translations of his works into English, but the critical Weimar edition in Germany has often been used as well. The important American edition in fifty-five volumes, known as *Luther's Works*, has been preferred whenever volumes were available.

Woodland Hills, California.

April, 1971

Introduction

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In his masterly work on *Luther's Theology*, Reinhold Seeberg, prominent church historian of half a century ago, asserts with considerable emphasis that the German Reformation was essentially the breakthrough, or the coming of age, of the German religious spirit. This spirit (*germanischer Geist*) had clashed often and seriously throughout medieval times with the Latin spirit in the Western Catholic Church, only to suffer defeat upon defeat. Until the arrival of Martin Luther, it never tasted the joys of victory.

Both of these two lines of thought, the Latin and the German, had effective advocates in Western Europe in the Reformation era. In the Romance countries the Latin spirit prevailed, and in the age of the Counter-Reformation it brought to the Roman Church both inner renewal and reform and outer splendor in art and architecture. In the Germanies the great Erasmus tried to make the Latin spirit effective by his advocacy of reform in the best humanistic tradition of Renaissance thought and scholarship, and he found many like-minded intellectuals in northern Europe who shared his high aim to restudy the sources of Christianity for a reform of the church. However, Erasmus failed because of fundamental differences in the mental and spiritual outlook of the German spirit, which, with its emphasis on the psychological and mystical nature in man, withstood the Latin spirit. "Germanism," writes Seeberg, "rejected Romanism."

It had taken the German spirit the length of the Middle Ages to arrive at the conviction that it and the Latin spirit could never amalgamate. The Reformation marked the end of the process. Here Germanism shrugged off the form of Latin Christianity, and the two types parted company. The German spirit returned to Augustine and Paul, to the spirit of primitive

Christianity. However, from Augustine it took chiefly the mystical element found in the great Church Father from Hippo, and, via it, went back to the true sources of early Christian thought, notably to Paul.

This, Seeberg thinks, was Luther's contribution but not his alone. Many German religious thinkers also gave abundantly from their spiritual store. Such mystics as Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Sebastian Franck, Kaspar Schwenkfeld, and the Anabaptist sectaries all contributed to the creation of a type of Christianity which reflected the German spirit as surely as the Greek and the Latin brand of Christianity reflected the Greek and the Latin spirit. "The Reformation is Christianity as comprehended in the German spirit." To be sure, Latin Christianity also determined to a very considerable degree the German reform movement, but the principal source of this influence was Augustine's understanding of Paul. Even so, as the Reformation moved closer and closer to the Pauline concept of the gospel, it also moved farther and farther away from the Augustinian stage of Latin religious development. Consequently, the German Reformation may properly be considered a distinct stage in the understanding of Pauline thought.

Among the various tendencies and factors in pre-Reformation Germany none was more significant than the rapidly growing presence of a people's Christianity, a *Laienchristentum*, as Seeberg calls it. This was an attitude of the German soul that comprehended all the elements of German character. It manifested itself chiefly in an emphasis on personal experience in religion and in the ethical change of personality, as well as in the religious improvement of the church and in a social betterment of life. "This laymen's Christianity with its mystical and practical tendencies was the last step before the Reformation. In it were comprehended all the elements that the German spirit had welded together into unity in the course of the Middle Ages." A prominent mark of this culture was the ever-growing emphasis on the true meaning of earthly possessions and their corresponding moral values. The present world is not a vale of tears; rather it gives man many beautiful, good, and genuine gifts. The thought that the world belongs to God now regains a lost meaning. Not only was the world "very good" as it came forth from the Creator in the beginning in its sinless state, as was believed, but also after its decadence through sin it retained great beauty and riches for the present enjoyment and use of its inhabitants. We meet here a new evolution of secular labor and secular professions such as the German mystics of the fourteenth century or Wycliffe in England had anticipated: The world is a convenient place to live in; man can develop his talents here even to capitalistic enterprise. Every person has his calling. Man is not God's slave

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but his steward, and his sphere of operation is this world.

All this and more found its final expression in the Reformation. Important stands that fact that it was a new form of Christianity which united old German spiritual quests with the demands of a new age. In so doing it went back, by way of Augustine, to the Christian concepts of Paul, the concepts of personal Christian liberty, the personal priesthood of believers, and a people's church as apart from a hierachal.¹

Seeberg's brilliant analysis deserves thoughtful attention. Our age is familiar with the claim that peoples and nations possess backgrounds and peculiarities comprehended in the term "soul" or "spirit." We hear of the "spirit" which characterizes various nationalities. Who can deny or forget the strange and terrifying display of nationalistic "spirit" during World War II or the orgies of the "spirit" in an era of revolution?

However, there lurk in Seeberg's argument certain weaknesses and doubtful conclusions. It reminds us of other brilliant theories that have not stood the test of time. We think of Burckhardt's interpretation of the Italian Renaissance where the "Latin spirit" revolted against the "German spirit," which had, it was claimed, captured the church of the Middle Ages and had resulted in theological hairsplitting and sterility of thought until the Italian genius broke through in the era of the Renaissance to study anew and relive the classical sources and interests in things human. Or we mention the Weber-Tawny theory that made John Calvin and Calvinism the supreme factors in the development of modern capitalism with all its ugly manifestations in modern history.

There seems to be no compelling reason for making the German spirit as such responsible for the Reformation. On the one hand, not all Germans accepted the new movement. Large sections of Germany remained Catholic, and some territories returned to the old faith after they had become evangelical. In Switzerland the German cantons split decisively on the question of religious reform. On the other hand, several of the French cantons followed John Calvin's thought, as did many towns and communities in France. Scandinavia became Lutheran; but, although German influence was undoubtedly somewhat present in the Scandinavian countries, how can we assign that tremendous turnabout to nothing more than the neighboring German spirit?

And what about the British Isles? In England and in Scotland Luther was known and used, but the former developed Anglicanism and the latter, a Celtic country, developed Calvinism. Yet Ireland, another Celtic land, was virtually untouched by any reform movement.

This series of considerations is not meant to deny the presence or importance of the German spirit in the Reformation. Scholars agree generally that in German pre-Reformation history there came to light—now dimly, now brightly—political, moral, and spiritual characteristics that are uniquely German and thus reveal the essence of the German spirit. Situated in the heartland of Europe, the Germans came under constant pressures either to accept or to reject foreign customs and concepts. By nature highly individualistic and divided, living with a minimum of tribal organization, they came under the influence of the most thoroughly organized institution of the Middle Ages, the Latin Church of Western Europe. Charles the Great made them, either by force or by their choice, a part of the Holy Roman Empire, and, in 962 when the empire was revived by Otto I as the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, they fell for three centuries under a political-spiritual program of life and action which left them divided and impotent among the growing states of Europe. While France and England developed into strong national monarchies, Germany missed both national unity and, in the end, imperial greatness.

Denied both imperial splendor and national strength, the Germans found a measure of compensation in other ways. They contributed much to medieval scholasticism. They built prosperous cities that controlled, like the Hansas, empires of commerce. In their invention of the printing press they presented the Reformers with an unrivaled tool for religious proselytism. And from about the beginning of the fourteenth to the sixteenth century the Germans produced such a line of religious personalities—Meister Eckhardt, Heinrich Suso, Johannes Tauler, Wessel Gansfort, Johannes von Goch, John of Wesel, Nicholas of Cusa, the unknown author of *Theologia Deutsch*, and the many mystics of the movement known as the *Devotio Moderna*—that no country in Europe was able to rival or even approach them. It is among these thinkers and mystics that scholars find strains of thought, expressions of religious experience, and strong criticisms of the established church that indicate or reveal serious differences between German and Latin Christianity.

Here is where the German spirit and the Latin really meet, as Gerhard Ritter, in his recent *Luther: His Life and Work*, has, with fine reserve, pointed out:

"The distinction between the history of the German Spirit and the general development of European culture first becomes clear at the point at which the religious needs of the German soul came into conflict with the spirit of the Roman Church."²

But this does not in itself explain Luther and the Reformation either, a

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fact which Ritter understood and put down succinctly in the following words with which we close our introduction:

"Not as a German, but as a Christian, as a living witness to the reality of God, Martin Luther became the Reformer of the Western Church. There is no real precedent for his work, for his rediscovery of the mystery of primitive Christianity. It can only be understood when we see it relived in the spiritual life of the man himself."³

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Reinhold Seeberg, *Die Lehre Luthers* (Leipzig, 1917), pages 1-55.
2. Gerhard Ritter, *Luther: His Life and Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), page 21.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

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uther's life as a monk is the key to his religious outlook and contribution. Large amounts of paper and ink, as well as much scholarship, have gone into the analysis of every available scrap of information on the subject, and the debate has by no means ended. Why did he enter a monastery? What happened to him there? When did it happen? What was "the mystery of primitive Christianity" which he as a monk rediscovered? These questions are as fundamental as they are controversial.

The young law student entered the monastery of the Augustinian Eremites in Erfurt on July 18, 1505. The evening before his entry he entertained his friends and fellow students in a farewell dinner. He had been a jovial friend and was esteemed among students as a philosopher and a musician. As a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in the spring of 1505, he had stood second in the class. Small wonder, then, that his friends tried hard, even to tears, to dissuade him from becoming a monk. His answer: "Today you see me and then nevermore." How could he do this to his friends? How could he give up law, the best secular profession of his time?

Yet he did. He even sold his school library, taking only the Latin poets Vergil and Plautus to his cell in the monastery.

A. V. Mueller, a Luther scholar of half a century ago, in discussing the reasons why Luther became a monk, reached the conclusion that the young law student was already a "religious scrupulous" at the time of entry or even earlier.¹ A touch of credence is lent to this assertion by two Luther statements in his later years. In a letter of January 1, 1532, he wrote of a "temptation" not unknown to him in his youth.² And in a table talk in 1537 he alluded to "temptation and sadness as a young Master of Arts."³ To these late and indefinite statements are added other incidents.

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Earlier in 1505 he had accidentally cut an artery in his leg and had bled dangerously. His school friend Lang had recently entered the same Augustinian monastery, and this, it is thought, might have influenced Luther. Therefore, it is held, he was already conditioned for the monastic life when on July 2, on his return from a visit to his parents, he encountered near Stotternheim a severe thunderstorm. A bolt of lightning felled him to the ground, and in terror he cried out: "Save, St. Anna! I will be a monk."

He made his vow and he kept it. This reveals the willpower and the honesty of the young Master of Arts. Neither the strong persuasion of his friends nor their tears could change his new course of action. Years later he saw the hand of God in his vow and wrote to Melanchthon about his experience: "I am uncertain with what kind of attitude I took my vow. I was more overpowered than drawn (by considerations). God wanted it this way."⁴

More explicit is a letter to his father, Hans Luther, written from the Wartburg in 1521. Luther's order decided that the young monk should be ordained to the priesthood, and on May 2, 1507, he celebrated his first mass. Among the invited guests for the high occasion was his father, still scarcely reconciled to his son over his decision to become a monk. Fourteen years later, in 1521, Martin wrote his father:

"I told you that I had been called by terrors from heaven and that I did not become a monk of my own free will and desire, still less to gain any gratification of the flesh, but that I was walled in by the terror and agony of sudden death and forced by necessity to take the vow."⁵

On the reason why he became a monk, this is Luther's most comprehensive statement. In it he ascribes his action solely to the element of fear in the thunderstorm. Later, in a table talk from the year 1539 he reviewed the whole episode. He told about the deep concern his friends felt over his vow and how they insisted with tears that he should not fulfill it. He mentioned the anger of his father over the step. Then he added that regardless of all urging he persisted in his proposition, and that once a monk he never intended to leave the monastery. "I was," he says, "dead to the world until God's time came and junker Tetzl forced me and Dr. Staupirz stirred me into action against the pope."⁶

Clearly, the Luther speaking here was not sorry over the step he had taken. Nor was he antagonistic to the monastic ideal. He was certain that he had done the right thing. There is nothing in his pre-Reformation writings to indicate displeasure with the monastic idea of life. To be sure, he could criticize aspects of the monastic way, but in his lectures on Romans as late as 1516 we come upon this statement:

"Is it then, a good thing to become a monk nowadays? My answer is this: I think that to become a monk is a better thing today than it has been for the last two hundred years, and for this reason: up to now the monks drew away from the cross and it was something glorious to be a monk. But now people begin to dislike them again, even the good ones among them, on account of their foolish garb. For this is what is meant to be a monk; to be detested by the world and to let oneself be taken for a fool. He that out of love submits to this kind of treatment does very well indeed."⁷

Luther became a monk to fulfill a "pressing and forced vow" made under conditions of terror. He had no personality conflicts, and for some time all went well. He wrote: "I know from personal experience and from that of many others how peaceful and inactive Satan can be in one's first years as a priest or monk."⁸

This clear-cut statement is done no violence if it is interpreted to mean that Luther was sure of his course of action and life beyond the year of his ordination to the priesthood, in 1507, two years after his entry into the monastery. This fact is also borne out by the important dialogue between him and his father on the occasion of the celebration of his first mass. When the son tried to explain why he had taken vows, the father countered: "Let us hope that it was not an illusion and a deception." When the son "in filial confidence" upbraided his father for being angry, the latter retorted: "Have you not also heard that parents are to be obeyed?" The young priest could not forget the answers; they cut him to the quick. "But," wrote he in 1521, "I was so sure of my own righteousness that in you I heard only a man, and boldly ignored you."⁹ Such language can mean only that at the time of his ordination in 1507 Luther was sure of his cause. As yet he was no scrupulous.

When Luther entered the monastery, he joined an institution whose entire existence has been determined by the problem of how to fight sin. The advantage that a monk has over the secular man lies precisely in the fact that he has withdrawn from the world in order to concentrate all his powers on the battle against evil. His life is devoted to warfare against whatever displeases God, that is, sin in all its manifestations.

In this task of fighting evil, the sin of disobedience looms formidable. Man, in every aspect of his life, refuses to obey God. He is selfish, proud, and self-centered. He will not, as Luther put it later, let God be God but insists that he is God. But in this warfare the monk has access to the important weapon humility. Throughout the ages of monastic history the high ideal of humility has stood opposed to pride, selfishness, and disobedience.

A monk in that day lived strenuously. Roughly one half of the days in

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the year were fast days, to be augmented in number by the serious minded. On a fast day one meal sufficed. In the monastery the chapter hall and the dining hall were heated, but regardless of the time of year all else was cold. At midnight the monk must awaken to sing the first of a series of prayers in the cold church nearby. Often there was no more sleep after midnight; four to five hours rest must suffice. Prayers were a form of asceticism, and during his first year Luther spent about six hours daily in prayer. Daily confessions and numerous duties, such as cleaning halls and rooms and maintaining constant silence, added to the obligations.

Upon his entry into the monastery Luther received a Bible, which he studied so diligently that eventually he committed large parts to memory. Finally, ordered to study theology, he acquired all the medieval degrees in the subject in about five years. His own account of the years in the monastery surely is not exaggerated.

"When I was a monk," Luther wrote, "I made a great effort to live according to the requirements of the monastic rule. I made a practice of confessing and reciting all my sins, but always with prior contrition; I went to confession frequently, and I performed the assigned penances faithfully."¹⁰

And again he said: "I was a pious monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I dare say that if ever a monk reached heaven by monkery, I would get there. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me witness. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work."¹¹

It was while he was living so intensely that his troubles began, and they grew with the years. The monastery, which should have been a haven of refuge and peace, became a place of spiritual anguish and uncertainty. His torments of soul seem to have grown in intensity as he mastered the theology of the church as expounded in the University of Erfurt and, more important, as he mastered the contents of the Holy Scriptures.

Later he said: "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to dig deeper and deeper for it where my temptations led me."¹²

When Luther entered the monastery he placed himself unreservedly under the authority of his order. What his Augustinian superiors would command, he must do, and it was most unlikely that a brilliant young Master of Arts would not be used in the interests of his order. This was especially true since the Augustinian houses in Saxony had in Dr. John von Staupitz a learned, devout, progressive, and dedicated vicar-general, who was himself a professor of theology at the recently founded University of Wittenberg. He became Luther's spiritual and intellectual mentor.¹³

Studying theology in the Erfurt monastery, Luther in the winter of 1508-09 was suddenly transferred to Wittenberg in such haste as to prevent him "from saying good-bye" to his brothers. He was called there to lecture in moral philosophy and, of course, to pursue his own theological studies.

Luther explained the sudden move to a friend in Erfurt in these words: "Thus I am now at Wittenberg, by God's command or permission. If you desire to know my situation, I am well, thank God, except that my studies are very severe, especially philosophy, which from the first I would willingly have changed for theology; I mean the theology which searches out the meat of the nut, and the kernel of the grain and the marrow of the bones. But God is God; man often, if not always, is at fault in his pronouncements."¹⁴

When Luther hurried off these lines to John Braun, he had just taken his first degree in religion, Bachelor of Biblical Studies.¹⁵ He was also busy lecturing on Aristotle's *Ethici*, as well as working toward the next degree in theology. He called these studies "very severe" and singled out philosophy, that is, the *Ethics* of Aristotle, as less than satisfying labor. He had already begun to find Aristotle, in his garb as a moral philosopher, distasteful. This feeling of distrust presently grew into open enmity, not against everything in Aristotle, but certainly against the use and application made of his moral philosophy in the doctrines of the church. And yet the theology which Luther designated as "meat," "kernel," and "marrow" would grow into the Scripture-oriented thought of the later Luther. In 1509 he was already forming opinions that would remain with him through life.

He would soon be permitted to teach theology because in the autumn of 1509 he was to take the second degree in the subject, called Master of the Sentences, or *Sententiar*. Back in Erfurt again, he began in the autumn of 1509 a series of lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. It seems that he may not have finished the series until after his return from a journey to Rome in the early part of 1511.

The *Sentences* by Peter Lombard, bishop of Paris and professor of theology at the cathedral school in Paris in the twelfth century, became the standard work of Catholic doctrines in the Middle Ages. To study and to analyze it was obligatory, and every important scholastic since the time of Lombard had written a commentary on all or part of the work. Some of these commentaries, like that by William of Ockham and Gabriel Biel, became famous in their own right, and they form the so-called nominalist school of theology to which Luther himself belonged. William of Ockham, from the fourteenth century, was the founder of nominalism, which distinguished itself chiefly by challenging the theological system of thought built up by

Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century and based on the application of Aristotle's use of reason to Biblical doctrines.

Luther's marginal comments on Lombard's *Sentences* have survived, revealing his strong, even acid attacks on the intrusion of philosophy into the domain of theology. Scholars have analyzed these comments in much detail and with differing results. Otto Scheel finds nothing unusual or disturbing.¹⁶ A. V. Mueller, on the other hand, thinks that Luther was indeed breaking with his own school of thought when he classed Gabriel Biel among the "philosophical larvae."¹⁷ Paul Vignaux, an able and judicious Catholic scholar, finds that Luther was indeed detaching theology from the "envelope" of philosophy.¹⁸ More recently, Gordon Rupp has written discriminately on the subject, warning that "we must not exaggerate" these statements and that "there are still matters on which Luther can gratefully quote the Ockhamists."¹⁹

Luther dismissed Aristotle as "that rancid philosopher," the "babble Aristotle with his frivolous arguments." "Philosophy," he asserted, "has produced many monstrosities which, but for it, we might solve easily but now find impossible of solution." Again he spoke of philosophers who "contend in empty words, novelties, and double-talk."

Theologians he contemptuously dismissed as "philosophical larvae," including the Gabriel Biel he knew well and at this time even followed in much of his own theology. Duns Scotus he sharply deflated. Even Ockham caught his criticism.²⁰

However, when all these statements and more are viewed in the light of the then current practice in theological controversy and academic freedom, they do not add up to anything startling. Luther worked still in the Ockhamist tradition, but he was moving back to Augustine by way of Peter Lombard. He made no radical break with his teachers. Nor did he give much light on any of his later distinctive doctrines. There was no sign of a serious spiritual problem or struggle in these notes. He mentioned Christ as "our life, our righteousness, and our resurrection through faith in His incarnation"; then, noting the many famous doctors who have no Scriptures on their side but only human reason, he affirmed: "I say with the apostle, 'Even if an angel from heaven,' that is a doctor in the church, 'teaches otherwise, let him be accursed.'" In dealing with the problem of sin he asks: "Who can boast in this life of having a pure heart?" And in a marginal note to Augustine he speaks of being "daily a sinner" and "daily a martyr" to sin.²¹

These various comments from Luther are mild anticipations of what was to come, but they do indicate a certain antinomian trend in his thought.

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Essentially he remained a legalist, however, and there is nothing to indicate that he was in the throes of a spiritual conflict when he jotted down these marginal notes.

By 1511 the struggle had begun. Early that year or late in 1510, Luther was sent to Rome in company with another Augustinian brother to represent his monastery on a matter of monastic life and policy in which the Augustinians of Erfurt found themselves at odds with their provincial superior, Dr. Staupitz. Surely it was a compliment for the young theologian to be selected for such a mission, since it gave him the rare opportunity to visit the Holy City and to share in the spiritual blessings available there to all, whether strangers or pilgrims.

Luther understood also and sought to take full advantage of the visit. His words describe vividly his activities: "In Rome I was a frantic saint. I ran through all the churches and catacombs and believed everything, their lies and falsehoods. I celebrated several masses in Rome, and almost regretted that my father and mother were still living, for I would have liked to redeem them from purgatory with my masses and other good works and prayer."²²

On another occasion he had this to say: "I did not stay long in Rome, but found occasion to celebrate and hear many a mass. I still shudder when I think of it now. I heard people laughingly boast in the inn that some celebrated mass saying to the bread and wine: 'Bread art thou and bread wilt thou remain.' Then they elevated it. I was a young and pious monk who was hurt by such words. What should I think? I had to think that in Rome they talked so freely and publicly."²³

But Luther also had other thoughts in Rome. He was ascending the "Sacred Stairs,"²⁴ reputed to be Pilate's staircase to the judgment hall, on his knees saying a Lord's Prayer on each step for his grandfather's soul in purgatory; but as he rose at the top, the dread thought came: "Who knows if this is so?"²⁵ He had raised the unthinkable question.

Insofar as the available sources inform us, this was the first time Luther questioned a prescribed religious act of his church. The question came with such surprise as to stand in sharp variance with everything else he did in Rome. How could this "frantic saint," who ran from churches to catacombs, believed everything, and wanted to make his mother blessed by celebrating "a mass in the Church of St. John on a Saturday," but was prevented from getting near an altar by a "great commotion,"²⁶ utter a thought like this? How could he question one of the most cherished acts of a pilgrimage to Rome? Yet he did. No ordinary pilgrim, Martin Luther.

Years later he said he would not exchange his trip to Rome for money.

The Monk

"Otherwise I would not believe what I saw with my own eyes."²⁷ To him Rome was and ever remained a city of "godlessness and evil," that respected "neither God nor man, neither sin nor modesty."²⁸ To underestimate, his visit was a disappointment. The physical beauties of Renaissance Rome, with its art and architecture, he did not see. Even the mission of the two monks on behalf of their house in Saxony was a failure.

From this we must not conclude that Luther's faith in the church was damaged. Once back in Erfurt, he was again busy with many duties. Dr. John Staupitz had determined that Luther should study for the doctorate. "That will give you something to do," he said to the monk.

When Luther remonstrated that his strength would fail him and that he might not live long, Staupitz countered: "Do you not know that God must do great things? He needs many wise and intelligent men to assist Him. If you should die, you will be His adviser."²⁹

Probably to facilitate his studies Luther was transferred again to Wittenberg sometime in 1511. The following year on October 18 and 19 the ceremonies for the doctorate were consummated. For the high occasion Luther had invited the "godly fathers," that is, his superiors and colleagues in Erfurt, to partake "in this my solemn parade."³⁰ None of them appeared. The relations between Luther and the brother Augustinians of Erfurt had cooled, and the "godly fathers" chose to ignore their brilliant member, who never rejoined his own monastery.

No sooner had Luther become a Doctor of Biblical Theology than Staupitz resigned his chair in this subject and Luther took it over. In Wittenberg he would grow not only into a Reformer but also into the most distinguished and influential professor in all of German history.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A. V. Mueller, *Luthers Werdegang bis zum Turmerlebnis* (Gotha, 1920), page 16.

2. WA Br 4, No. 1191, January 1, 1532. This is obviously a reference to an illness from which he was then recovering and from which he had long suffered.

3. WA TR 3, No. 3593. This could refer just as well to his experience after 1505 as to his earlier days as a young M.A.

4. LW 48, pp. 300, 301, September 9, 1521, to Melanchthon.

5. LW 48, p. 332, November 21, 1521, to Hans Luther.

6. WA TR 4, No. 4707.

7. *Luther: Lectures on Romans in The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 15. Transl. by W. Pauck (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 385.

8. WA 8, pp. 31, 32.

9. LW 48, p. 332.

10. LW 27, p. 13.

11. WA 38, p. 143.

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12. WA TR 1, No. 352.
13. Reference is made to the work in German by E. Wolf, *Staupitz und Luther* (Leipzig, 1927), a careful study on the relationship of these two friends and leaders.
14. Letter to John Braun, March 17, 1509. Quoted in H. J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), page 24.
15. March 9, 1509.
16. Otto Scheel, *Martin Luther. Vom Catholizismus zur Reformation* (Tuebingen, 1917), Vol. 2, pp. 210-248.
17. A. V. Mueller, *Luthers Werdegang bis zum Turmerlebnis*, pages 89-117.
18. Paul Vignaux, *Luther. Commentateur des Sentences* (Paris, 1935).
19. Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God. Luther Studies* (London, 1953), page 93.
20. The quotations in this paragraph are taken from his marginal notes to the works of St. Augustine, which he was reading, and to the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Found in WA 9, pp. 43, 23, 57, 24, 74.
21. WA 9, pp. 46, 17, 18.
22. Hillerbrand, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Scala Sancta*.
25. WA 51, p. 89, Sermon Nov. 15, 1545. Years later Hans Luther reported that his father had said: "The just shall live by his faith." The son believed, as did Philip Melanchthon, Luther's first biographer, that Luther understood Romans 1:17 early, that is, before his visit to Rome. That he knew the text is certain, for he had already annotated it in the lectures on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. There is no argument against the possibility of Luther's remembering the text while he was ascending the "Sacred Stairs."
26. Hillerbrand, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 26.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 25. Observe that Luther was not criticizing doctrines of the church.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
30. LW 48, pp. 6, 7. Letter Sept. 22, 1512.

The Psalms



Soon after Luther's graduation Dr. Staupitz ordered him to lecture on the book of Psalms. By August 1513 he was ready. As he began the lectures on this inexhaustible source of spiritual travail and exultation, he said:

"Fathers and Brothers!

"I feel very surely the weight upon my neck of this task, which for a long time I was reluctant to undertake and to which I yield only when compelled to do so by order. For I confess plainly that to this day there are some Psalms that I cannot understand, and unless the Lord enlighten me with your merits, as I hope, I cannot interpret them."¹

This is Luther, the man of compulsion. He entered the monastery under the compulsion of a vow. He became a priest under compulsion. He studied theology from the beginning in 1507 to the end of the doctorate in 1512 under compulsion. And now he began a great career of teaching under compulsion. So far Dr. Staupitz had been the compelling factor in his career, but presently a much higher power, which Luther called the will of God, or the finger of God, would control and order him. It would indicate what Luther must do and say and where he must go.

The divine guidance would first lead him onto an uncertain and dangerous road, where at times he would encounter doubt, vexation of spirit, anguish of soul and body, and despair. The problem was concerning sin and what to do with it. Later in life, speaking of this troublesome experience, he could say that sin made him crazy.

Luther felt himself a great sinner. Now it happened that in dealing with the problem of sin, he was supposedly in the best available place found in his day, the monastery. Monastic life centers in the concept of how to overcome sin. The fact that Luther was a monk should have given him a decided

advantage over laymen in the struggle with sin. As a priest he was to have at least a partial disposition over the salvation machinery of the church as found in its sacramental system. And in his function as professor of theology, he instructed other clerics in the doctrines and the theological intricacies of the church.

However, in his daily practical life as monk, priest, and professor, Luther could not find an answer to the problem of sin. He now discovered that in following the prescribed routine of such good works as penance, prayers, fasting, night waking, and other forms of monastic asceticism, he still found no peace of mind and no security of soul. He had no certainty of salvation.

Luther needed and wanted God's sanctifying grace. He had been taught that it would come to him when he had done all he could to prepare for it, and he could do a good deal. He could will to spend hours in confession, in prayers, in fasting, in sorrow for sin.

Gabriel Biel, the great and learned theologian and exponent of nominalism, to whose school of thought Luther belonged, had said that the human will could have a part in the process of salvation by doing good works. "The human will can love God above all things through its own natural powers. The sinner is also able to remove the hindrances to grace, because he is able to keep from sinning and committing sinful acts, yea, to hate sin and to will not to sin. By the removal of the impediments and by the good steps toward God made by his own free will he can acquire the merit *de congruo*, the first grace in turning toward God."²

Luther tried diligently to prepare the ground for God's sanctifying grace by doing all he could, that is, by earning congruous merit. But Luther's problem was always, "Have I done enough?" Later in life he stated his spiritual predicament in these words: "Nevertheless, my conscience could never achieve certainty but was always in doubt and said: 'You have not done this correctly. You were not contrite enough. You omitted this in your confession.' Therefore the longer I tried to heal my uncertain, weak, and troubled conscience with human traditions, the more uncertain, weak, and troubled I continually made it."³

As he continued the prescribed routine to achieve certainty, he sank only deeper into doubt. He says: "After vigils, devotions, fasts, prayers, and other most severe exercises, with which I afflicted myself nearly to death as a monk, doubt still remained in my mind, and I thought: 'Who knows if these things are pleasing to God?'"⁴

Of the intensity of these periods of struggle he tells further in language that can only apply to his own experience: "I myself 'knew a man' who claimed

that he had often suffered these punishments, in fact over a very brief period of time. Yet they were so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and one who had not himself experienced them could not believe them. And so great were they that, if they had been sustained or had lasted for half an hour, even for one tenth of an hour, he would have perished completely and all of his bones would have been reduced to ashes. At such a time God seems terribly angry, and with Him the whole creation. At such a time there is no flight, no comfort, within or without, but all things accuse. . . . In this moment (strange to say) the soul cannot believe that it can ever be redeemed. . . . All that remains is the stark-naked desire for help and a terrible groaning, but it does not know where to turn for help."⁵

Luther called these attacks of fear and anguish *Anfechtungen*. Bainton, in rendering the German into English, has written: "It is all the doubt, turmoil, pang, tremor, panic, despair, desolation, and desperation which invade the spirit of man."⁶ John Bunyan, who understood Luther's terrible plight well, called it the "bruised conscience." A few scholars have seized upon the Latin term *concupiscentia*, which Luther used often and which we render generally as concupiscence, to assert that passion and lust were his real problems. Actually, these seem to have been the least disturbing factors in Luther's struggle.

In the preceding paragraphs we have indicated briefly the spiritual problems that disturbed the young professor in the course of his first important series of lectures. Scholars agree generally that his own struggles had begun some time before he confessed to his students, the "fathers and brothers," who were obviously mature men, that he did not understand some psalms and needed their "merits" to interpret them. Scholars also hold widely that in the course of these lectures he resolved the problem of certainty of salvation by rediscovering the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ as stated in Romans 1:17. For the moment we will leave open the question of Luther's rediscovery and go to the content of the lectures, which he did not finish until the end of the winter semester of 1515.

The rules of exegesis of the times demanded that Luther offer a fourfold explanation of the meaning of the text. To illustrate: on Psalm 31:1 he must present the following interpretation:

Literal: Applies to Christ. That is, the words "Deliver Me in Thy righteousness" are a prayer of Christ.

Allegorical: Applies to the church. Christ prays for the members of His body as its head.

Tropological: Applies to the individual believer. It is his prayer also.

Anagogical: The eschatological sense. Verse 1 refers also to the final salvation in God's eternal kingdom.⁷

Luther had mastered this method and used it effectively. Later as Reformer he would discard it but never completely.

We have said that Luther's basic problem was sin and its cure. This is also the problem of theology, and no young theologian has surpassed Luther in wealth or detail of discussion and exposition of the subject. In his lectures on the Psalms and in those on Romans he dealt with the problem in a grand manner, while his lectures on Galatians in 1516 and on Hebrews in 1517-18 form a complement to the first creative and pre-Reformation period of Luther as a theologian.

"The starting point," says Luther, "is sin, from which we must constantly depart. The goal is righteousness, toward which we must move unceasingly."⁸

In the lectures on the Psalms Luther follows in a general way the division of sin as found in 1 John 2:16: "The lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life." Obviously this threefold arrangement answers closely to the threefold monastic vows under which Luther was living.⁹

In Luther's commentary the beginnings of the problem of sin take us back to the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve transgressed the command of God and so delivered all to the devil. We are conceived and born in sin, and, although original sin is washed away miraculously in the sacrament of baptism, the tinder or fuel of original sin remains constantly with us. Nowhere in the commentary does Luther develop a new concept of original sin, but he remains in the traditional scholastic tone.¹⁰ This will change in his lectures on Romans.

Nor does Luther dwell long in his comments on sin as concupiscence or lust of the flesh, the sin through which man devotes himself to the mammon of life so as to make it the decisive factor. The inordinate desire for many things can be included in the sin of life: riches, beauty, honor, rank, natural gifts, gold, silver, house, land, status, love to another person, and anything that is merely human and secular.¹¹ Luther finds this sin especially present in the clergy in the rush after benefices and in papal and priestly avarice as opposed to poverty. But Luther does not find the lust of the flesh the great, besetting, or all-encompassing sin of mortals. We must never think that Luther dallies with sin of any kind, but he does not consider the concupiscence of the flesh the most heinous in the three categories of sins which he finds in 1 John 2:16.

Neither does he find the second category, the lust of the eye, the most dif-

ficult sin to overcome. This may seem strange because concupiscence of the eye often includes killing, prohibited by the sixth commandment. Again he attacks sins in this class or category sharply, but he classes them with the lust of the flesh as not being basic.¹² The evils that Luther finds in the first two categories of sins—murder, stealing, false witness, immorality, et cetera—are recognized by the conscience of men everywhere as sins, but they are not the deepest sins in that they can be fought and overcome by the moral powers found in man. For, contrary to common opinion, Luther, in his lectures on the Psalms, had a good deal of confidence in man's power to conquer human lust and what he could designate as visible sin.

The unconquerable, universal, and foulest sin, Luther believes, is the pride of life. It includes all other forms of sin. Even the religious acts and aims of man contribute to the sin of pride. For example, a person may overcome desire and the lust of the eye and appear before men as spiritually clean, but his very victory over his lusts may only contribute to his pride. "Many are most truthful in the eyes of men; nevertheless, every man is a liar in the eyes of God."¹³

By nature man is a pagan who worships many gods other than the true God. He turns his back on God and his face toward the world and counts all that he sees as the true reality, while he neglects God. This is pride.¹⁴

Pride is egoism, the worship of self. Everything in man is "curved toward himself." His best deeds, his honor, wisdom, knowledge, power, riches, poverty, kindness, devotion, and all that he posits as signs of a high devotion to God, are but egoism, the invention of man's brain, and lead to the worship of self rather than God.¹⁵ We sing, "Glory to God in the highest," but mean actually, "Glory to me on earth," because while we consider the singing as beautiful as the song of a nightingale, God hears it as the coarse braying of a donkey.¹⁶

In these lectures Luther is merciless in his castigation of man's pride, which characterizes all of his actions in life. He assails the monks who present the most refined type of pride. There is no criticism of monasticism as an ideal of life, but the everyday workings of the system come under his heavy assaults. Luther uses the term "men of blood" to describe those who pride themselves on their achievements in the flesh, and he does not hesitate to apply the term to the cloisters and their occupants.¹⁷ The monks consider themselves the only truly religious, but actually they worship the false god Satan under the appearance of sanctity. One cloister despises another as inferior; one considers its patron saint as truly holy; one order looks down on the other; one set of ceremonies and statutes is thought to be superior to

all others.¹⁸ Bishops and priests join in mutual dislikes, even hatred, until the cult of the church becomes devoted to self-interest, pride, and dishonor.¹⁹ And, for good measure, he adds that the preachers, the doctors of the church, and those who handle the Word of God are especially subject to the devilish sin of pride in their strange interpretations and pronouncements.²⁰

This, with a good deal more, is Luther's analysis of sin in the *Commentary on the Psalms*.²¹ The question arises: "How can man possibly become rid of sin which is 'infinitely bad and cannot be evaluated'?"

His answers are not clear-cut. On the one hand, man cannot recognize sin; he does not even know that he is a sinner until God reveals the fact to him. He has his back toward God until God turns him about and reveals to him that he is a sinner and therewith gives him justifying grace.²² On the other hand, Luther makes use of pure scholastic language to describe how man can prepare himself for God's sanctifying grace. Man has free will and cannot be saved against his will. He cannot sin without using his reason, and none is so evil that he cannot recognize the voice of conscience as the voice of reason. "None is purely evil, unjust, and a liar, because to be wholly evil is not possible."²³ And the entire scholastic doctrine of grace meets us in the comment that God infallibly gives saving grace to him who does all that he can and so earns congruous merit. "For this is the promise of God and the covenant of His mercy."²⁴

Generally, in the lectures on the Psalms Luther posits humility, contrition, and remorse as the way to the cross and salvation. Of these, remorse expresses best the pitiless self-humiliation and sorrow which the penitent sinner must experience. Luther compares remorse with the plagues of Egypt, so devastating in their results.²⁵ The experience of remorse can lead to such a horror of sin as will make the penitent unable to sin. This is the sinner's darkest hour or moment of anguish. It is his descent to hell, for the fires of his conscience threaten him with destruction.²⁶ But, in this moment of deepest despair, when man's ego has been reduced to nothing and in his terror he calls upon God only, the Almighty begins His work of creation. When man hates himself and all that appertains to him, and accuses only himself, then God gives him His grace, for "blessed are they that mourn." Here we may see Luther's own travail of soul as he plumbs the depths of despair that lead eventually to a hatred and fear of sin and so to restoration at the cross of Christ. Every sinner must, as did Luther himself, pass through the portals of despair before he can receive the grace of God that brings salvation.²⁷

Nowhere in his lectures on the Psalms does Luther seem less sure of himself than when he discusses the subject of the law and the gospel. He must

touch this problem in commenting on the sin of the Jews, whom he finds centered in the pride of legalism. The Jews were slaves of the law, and this condition led them to emphasize temporal things and outward acts, which were only misinterpretations of the law.²⁸ Thus they committed both the concupiscence of the flesh and the pride of life. In discussing the relationship of the law and the gospel Luther can say that the "law spiritual and the gospel are the same,"²⁹ but he does not carry through his thought on the subject and so leaves us much in doubt as to the full relationship of the law and the gospel.

The heretics do not escape his criticism but are placed alongside the Jews as examples of pride. Their specific sin is their willful separation from the church in protest over its decadence and its false teachings. When they thus break with the church, they display a lack of love in that they condemn rather than build up the church. They reveal their pride in a constant overestimate of themselves as having the truth. Luther calls them "victory lords" with reference to truth and as teachers of it. Their self-righteousness precludes their listening to others; they will hear only themselves.³⁰ Their holiness becomes an outer appearance to cover up their inner corruption. Luther can talk about "holy heretics" who are actually better and more perfect than the church members, but he does not therefore condemn the church but the heretics who use their sanctity to prove that they are the true church. Thus their chief sin is disobedience, which takes on a demonic form and becomes the devil's best temptation.³¹

The foregoing brief discussion of the problem of sin in Luther's lectures on the Psalms has shown no substantial departure from the basic teachings of the medieval church. If we bear in mind the very considerable latitude of interpretation permitted a doctor of theology in the late Middle Ages in handling the Scriptures, we must admit that the young professor was a good son of the church in the Ockhamist tradition. He was a good monk as well, who in numerous statements throughout the lectures extolled the finest virtues of monastic life—humility, self-abnegation, and obedience to his vows. His criticisms were acid but never applied to the church as an institution for saving man.

Sometimes we come upon flashes of his future framework of religious thought. Thus in his comments on Psalm 110:1, "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou on My right hand," we come upon this surprising observation: "However, He [Christ] suffered for the elect but not for all men,"³² which indicates that Luther had begun to ponder on his doctrine of election. But it is the only mention of the subject in his lectures on the Psalms. He also

introduced other basic doctrines, such as the hidden God, in these lectures. Most important are his remarks on the subject of righteousness by faith in his comments on Psalm 31 and especially Psalm 71, where most contemporary Luther scholars assert that he actually stated his rediscovery of the gospel as found in Romans 1:17. But, as we shall see later, he presented only flashes of his future great Reformation doctrine, not the complete thought.

The outstanding fact in these lectures is Luther's knowledge of the Bible. That we would expect him to know the Psalms is obvious. These Hebrew poems became part of the speech and the life of every good monk. He sang them in the church services, read them daily, repeated them in his prayers constantly, and pondered over their words morning, noon, and night. Luther knew them from memory as they were found in the Vulgate by Jerome.

But that he had already mastered large parts of the rest of the Bible may surprise. However, this was strictly in keeping with the emphasis that the Ockhamist school of theology, or nominalism, placed upon the Scriptures. So Luther quoted at will from every book of Holy Writ. We know that he quoted from memory because he frequently gave an incorrect reference for a particular verse, or even a chapter, he was using. He always had a certain difficulty in remembering numbers, and this weakness showed up in his first commentary. However, his knowledge of the Bible was already massive, as is reflected in his interpretation of the Psalms.

His principle of exegesis, that Scripture must explain Scripture, was already in evidence, permitting him, under the medieval fourfold rule of exposition, to pile up Scriptural proof on any point under consideration until he had illustrated and established his argument fully. This led him at times into the use of texts for purposes of illustrating or proving a point in a way that appears to us to be far-fetched and unsound exegesis.

Finally, in the commentary on the Psalms, Luther had already passed beyond Aristotle and the "jurists" as the sources of Catholic doctrine, but he had not yet begun his frontal assault on the "ancient way," as the Thomistic school of Biblical exegesis was called, or on scholasticism as such.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Quoted in Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God* (London, 1953), page 131. See also WA 3, p. 14. Luther did not willingly become a professor and an exegete of the Old and New Testament books. He was ordered by Staupitz. Years later he commented on the command: "Had I known what I know now, ten horses would not have pulled me into it." (WA TR No. 406). Nor did he set a high value on his first attempt as an exegete but called the first series of his commentaries on Psalms, 1513-

The Psalms

1515, "fairly acceptable triflings and sponges," and in his biographic statement of 1545 he passed it by in silence. Nonetheless, the Psalter continued to claim his highest regard and interest. Even while he was giving the first series, he was collecting materials for a second and improved attempt. In 1517 he published an exposition in German of the Seven Penitential Psalms, that is, Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 (See *Luther's Works* 14, pp. 139-205). Twice he returned to his beloved Psalter, 1518-1521 and 1532-1535, for extensive lectures, but he never published one complete commentary on the entire book. In the prefaces to his translation of the Psalms, 1524 and 1545, he calls it a "precious and beloved book" that "might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible." His concept of interpretation of the Psalter became basic for his exegesis of all other books of Scripture.

2. Quoted in Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis, 1950), page 169.
3. LW 27, p. 13.
4. WA 40, II, p. 414. This is the question which he had asked at the top of the "Sacred Stairs" in Rome in 1510-11.
5. LW 31, p. 129. See also Gordon Rupp, *The Righteousness of God*, pages 102-120, for the best discussion of this subject.
6. R. H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, 1950), page 42.
7. See U. Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel* (St. Louis, 1951), page 60.
8. WA 4, p. 364.
9. I refer to a balanced and judicious study in Danish by N. Nojgaard, *Om Begrebet Synd Hos Luther* (Copenhagen, 1929), to which I am indebted. See also WA 3, p. 350.
10. WA 3, p. 453.
11. WA 4, pp. 129, 114; 3, p. 331.
12. WA 3, pp. 509, 356, 360, 421, 442.
13. WA 4, p. 269.
14. WA 3, p. 479; 4, p. 149.
15. WA 3, pp. 292, 183.
16. WA 3, p. 440.
17. WA 3, pp. 326, 332.
18. WA 4, pp. 29, 76.
19. WA 3, p. 333; 4, p. 450.
20. WA 3, p. 408.
21. Reference is made to Nojgaard, *Begrebet Synd Hos Luther*, pages 52-95.
22. WA 3, P. 627.
23. WA 3, p. 336.
24. WA 4, p. 262.
25. WA 3, p. 536.
26. WA 3, p. 432.
27. WA 3, p. 124.
28. WA 4, p. 324.
29. WA 4, p. 134.
30. WA 3, p. 497.
31. WA 3, pp. 27, 579.
32. WA 4, p. 227.

Romans

Z

The lectures on the Psalms reveal Luther as a capable but immature exegete, whose interpretation of Scripture at times reveals new ideas and approaches to theological problems but whose conclusions are often left unfinished and uncertain. By contrast the lectures on Paul's Romans, 1515-1516, show us a brilliant commentator who, though loyal to the church, is well on his way toward rejecting the traditional apparatus of exegesis and creating new methods of interpretation rooted and grounded in a new appreciation of the Biblical message.¹

The subject matter is still sin and its cure. Luther scholars since the time when Karl Holl discoursed on the subject in 1910² have generally held that Luther had already discovered the essence of his doctrine of righteousness by faith alone before he began his lectures on Romans in 1515, and that he therefore chose to make the real subject matter of his commentary not faith but humility. Since he had already experienced it, Luther did not choose to expound righteousness by faith, and so, strange as it may seem, he took the theme of humility, a term referred to in the Vulgate text of Romans only once (Romans 12:16), as the crowning virtue of Christian discipleship.

In his lectures on the Psalms Luther had naturally used the Vulgate, where the word humility—*humilitas*—or some Latin form of it is found 238 times, whereas the Latin word for faith is found but once.³ At least once in his lectures on the Psalms he had called humility "the whole righteousness." The same thought is continued in his commentary on Romans in an even intensified manner. Here he could use terms such as our having "a complete form of submission and humility," or doing good "from love and humility alone for God's sake," or about our fulfilling the "whole law of humility" toward God and men, or "the entire Scripture teaches nothing

else than humility," or God is "justified in those who in humility yield to His leading and believe in it," or "humility and faith are needed" in order for us to confess that we are foolish, liars, and weak, or "humility makes one capable of receiving every good," or "we must undergo an immense humiliation" so as not to deny Christ by disbelieving one single word of His, or "perfect self-knowledge is perfect humility, and perfect humility is perfect wisdom, and perfect wisdom is perfect spiritualness," or the "universal right or justice is humility" because it subjects one to everyone else, or God will not reckon the very "tinder" of sin—crimes, actual sins, and crooked dealings—to a man "because of his humility and the yearning of his faith."⁴

However, when all these statements and more are considered carefully, it is clear that Luther did not posit humility as anything but a spiritual aid toward righteousness. It is not righteousness or justification but only spiritual practice in monastic fashion that one needs to reach the perfection found in righteousness. "Therefore," said Luther in assigning to humility its proper place, "we must keep ourselves humble in all these respects, as if we were still bare, and look for the naked mercy of God that He may reckon us righteous and wise." This God will do if one is humble and does not seek to anticipate God's action by self-justification.⁵

To say, then, that humility is the main theme of Luther's lectures on Romans is not correct. The true subject of the commentary is sin and its cure, just as it was in the Psalms. Sin and righteousness are the key words in the lectures. It is evil, sin, unrighteousness that must be plucked up and destroyed, and it is God's righteousness that must be established.

Luther wastes no time telling us about the subject matter of his commentary. He begins: "The sum and substance of this letter is: to pull down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh (*i.e.*, of whatever importance they may be in the sight of men and even in our own eyes), no matter how heartily and sincerely they may be practiced, and to affirm, establish, and make large the reality of sin (however unconscious we may be of its existence)."

He then dwells for a moment on the men in history who lived good and virtuous lives without public display but who nevertheless found inward satisfaction in such living, and he dismisses them all with the words of Paul: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." Romans 1:22. Then he continues: "But here just the opposite shall be taught. For in the church we must not merely see to it that our righteousness and wisdom, which are not worth anything, are neither upheld by our own sense of glory nor extolled by the good opinion of others, but rather, we must take pains that

they are destroyed and plucked up from our own complacent inner feeling. . . . (For when we ourselves despise them, it will be easy for us not to care for the judgment and praise of others.)"⁶

Sin, then, must be plucked up, but no righteousness of man is sufficient for such a task. However, Luther immediately posits a cure for the evil thing: "For God does not want to save us by our own but by an extraneous righteousness which does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves, which does not arise on our earth but comes from heaven. Therefore, we must come to know this righteousness which is utterly external and foreign to us. That is why our personal righteousness must be uprooted."⁷

He leaves no doubt as to what he means by an "extraneous righteousness": "Moreover a true Christian must be so completely stripped of all that he calls his own that neither honor nor dishonor can affect him, because he knows that whatever honor is done to him is done to Christ, whose righteousness and gifts shine on him, and that whatever ignominy is inflicted upon him is inflicted on him as well as on Christ."⁸

And he goes on to clarify further what is involved in the process of plucking up our righteousness and in finding God's: "But, apart from special grace, much practice is required in order that one may reach this perfection. For even if by his native and spiritual gifts a man is wise, righteous, and good in the sight of men, he is not so regarded by God, especially if he himself considers himself as such. Therefore, we must keep ourselves humble in all these respects, as if we were still bare, and look for the naked mercy of God that he may reckon us righteous and wise. This God will do if one has been humble and has not anticipated the divine action by justifying himself and by entertaining too high an opinion of himself."⁹

In these introductory remarks Luther states the subject matter and problem of his commentary on Romans. It is sin, a condition in which man finds himself so deeply and helplessly involved that he cannot extricate himself by any means available within his own sphere of action. The righteousness which he needs, indeed must have, comes only from without—from heaven, from Christ, from "the naked mercy of God," who will reckon man as righteous provided he has humbled himself and has not tried to justify himself by claiming righteousness as something of which he is worthy as a matter of course.

The key words, then, in Luther's commentary on Romans are sin and righteousness and their opposites. Humility is the human element, the human aid, in bringing the sinner to Christ. Luther assigns it, as has been observed already, an important place in the process of getting God's righteousness.

Thus good works done in complete humility and with the right feeling of compunction "become acceptable in God's sight."¹⁰ He calls humility the "universal right or justice" because it "subjects everyone to everyone else and thereby gives everyone everything."¹¹ Humility is the emptying of oneself, the confessing that "we are foolish, unrighteous, liars, weak, evil."¹²

Its opposites are presumptuousness and pride, but the "fear of God is all-humiliating" and "makes one capable of receiving every good." Thus it helps the sinner "become worthy to be justified by Him."¹³ And in his comments on Romans 12:16, where the Vulgate uses the term *humble*, he defines humility as "the readiness to accommodate oneself to that which is inferior or not to despise that which is lowly, *i.e.*, it is characteristic of one who has a concern for what is base and exposed to contempt and who avoids all that is highly regarded. A man who is of this disposition has humility or, as we say, the virtue of humility."¹⁴

We have seen that while Luther, in his comments on Romans and in the best monastic tradition, gives humility a high status as an aid to finding God's righteousness, he never makes it anything more than a human element. He also recognizes that there is a humility that can make sinners "dance with wild excitement" and "cut themselves with knives and lances" while they accuse themselves with "words of humility and penitence," never realizing that their religious efforts might be as unclean as a "polluted garment." This false humility is naturally Satan's counterfeit to deceive, if possible, the very elect; but it will fail and there will be a "remnant according to the election of grace."¹⁵

The real problem, then, in Luther's commentary on Romans is to follow the young professor of religion as he builds a framework of theological thought based on his personal experience and development and as he finds a solution of the central thought or theme that disturbs his own relationship with God. How can a sinner find a gracious God and be sure that he has found Him? Or, put in Luther's opening words, how can sin be plucked up and destroyed and the righteousness of God be established? This is the theme of his lectures on Romans. It was also the theme of his lectures on the Psalms, though, we would say, on a more elementary or lower level. For it cannot be denied that Luther's treatment of the Psalms dealt with sin and its cure, while his treatment of Romans openly avows that this is the subject matter.

In his commentary on the Psalms Luther used the threefold division of sin as found in 1 John 2:16, *i.e.*, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. In his commentary on Romans this division has disappeared. Luther is certain that there is but one sin, the sin of pride, and he reaches a

more profound and inclusive understanding of the term. Sin is the basic evil in man's nature from which all else that is bad springs. There can be no emphasis on single actual sins apart from this basic sin. He now rejects the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins. All sin is by its very nature mortal. Every "actual sin . . . is, strictly speaking, the work and fruit of sin, and sin itself is that passion [tinder] and concupiscence, or that inclination toward evil and resistance against the good" which Paul mentions in Romans 7:15, 19.¹⁶ This concept of sin includes also original sin, which he had not fully defined in the lectures on the Psalms.

Now he is certain. "What, then, is original sin?" he asks. "It is not merely the privation of equality in the will, indeed, not merely the loss of light in the intellect or of strength in the memory, but in a word, the loss of all uprightness and of the power of all our faculties of body and soul and of the whole inner and outer man. Over and beyond this, it is the proneness to evil; the loathing of the good; the disdain for light and wisdom but fondness for error and darkness; the avoidance and contempt of good works but an eagerness for doing evil."¹⁷

The scholastic theologians had taught that original sin was the lack of original righteousness. Luther goes back to the earlier fathers and Paul who taught, he says, "that it is this original sin which is the tinder [*foames peccati*] of sin, the law of the flesh, the law of our members, the feebleness of nature, a tyrant, our original decease."¹⁸

Clearly, as the basic evil in the human mind and soul, Luther now identifies original sin, including the entire physical and moral life of man—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—all in one. He has gone beyond Augustine in his concept of sin and will remain here for life.

On the basis of this fundamental concept of sin Luther now elaborates on such various aspects of sin as egoism; desire; moral, spiritual, and intellectual debasement; loss of piety and happiness; and, most important, the loss of free will.

His statements on sin as egoism or self-love follow his earlier statements but are more emphatic and inclusive than those found in his lectures on the Psalms. Self-love is basic in all acts of man; even love between man and wife is self-love. It enters all our moral and religious acts and makes us issue in pride. Man is incurably concerned only with himself. Scripture describes "man as curved in upon himself—seeking himself in all things,"¹⁹ says Luther. Even when man obeys the commandment to love his neighbor as himself, he does so for selfish reasons; and when he wants to please God, he pleases only himself.²⁰

Sin is moral, spiritual, and intellectual depravity. Morally man reveals himself in the open or outward sins such as vanity, pride, immoral acts, and selfish desires. These are easily recognized. Luther's emphasis, however, lies in the religious and intellectual sins which go deeper into man's inmost being. In his comments on Romans 3:11 he speaks of the "manifest" sinners whom he calls the "godless on the left," and the intellectual-spiritual sinners whom he places "on the right." The two groups are distinguished thus: "Hence the godless on the left have no understanding, because in their vain desiring they are blinded by what is immediately within their reach. And those on the right have no understanding because they are ensnared in the conceit of their own wisdom and righteousness. And thus they shut themselves out from the divine light."²¹

It is, according to Luther, the latter group that holds the worst sinners. So sure is he of this that he asserts Paul did not write Romans for "manifest" sinners but for those "on the right." On the very first page of his commentary he singles out the "best and sincerest" among the philosophers (Socrates, for example), who did not seek their own glory but who nevertheless "could not refrain from being inwardly pleased with themselves and to praise themselves in their heart as righteous and good men." To these he applies the Pauline epitaph of "fools."²²

In his lectures on the Psalms Luther did not clarify the concept of concupiscence. He rejected the idea that it is the tinder of sin, hence ruling it out of the basic concept of sin. Nor did he discuss the relation between concupiscence as desire and as lust. In his treatment of Romans, however, aware of a need for clarification, he responds by making concupiscence and pride essentially the same. This identifies it as part of the whole egoistic tendency of man rather than as limited chiefly to lust of the flesh, which now becomes a less important aspect of the full problem of sin. Luther definitely does not identify concupiscence as lust only, but places it with covetousness and the "prudence of the flesh," which "enjoys only itself and uses everyone else, even God; it seeks itself and its own interests in everything."²³ Some scholars, such as Denifle and Grisar, have asserted that Luther was personally entangled in concupiscence as lust, but there is no proof whatever from his early lectures that this was the case.

In his exegesis of the fourth chapter of Romans, Luther inserts an explanation of Psalm 32, in the course of which he summarizes his teaching on the problem of sin. He creates four large divisions of the subject. The first, we may call the lack of true piety; the second, the absence of moral capacity for good; the third, the dominating presence of unrighteousness even when

one "does many good and righteous deeds"; and the fourth, our own moral and spiritual goodness, which is the "vice of pride" when we assert our own wisdom and which "makes people godless, heretical, schismatic, eccentric, and individualistic or particularistic."²⁴

Clearly, Luther gives the natural man the lowest possible rating in all things pertaining to his relationship with God. This view of man's hopelessness finds its completed form in Luther's doctrine of the unfree will. In his comments on the Psalms he alluded to this doctrine when he said that Christ "suffered for the elect but not for all men," but he was still under the influence of nominalistic theology which gives a very large measure of moral freedom to man. In the lectures on Romans Luther changes his approach to this important doctrine. While his study of Augustine undoubtedly contributed to his new interpretation, it seems that his anthropological concept of man as totally depraved must lead logically to his new conclusions. And in the apostle Paul, as well as in Scripture generally, he now finds compelling arguments for his own remorseless logic on the utterly diabolical bent and servitude of the human will in all that pertains to God and man's eternal welfare. Only God's grace, given freely in Christ to those whom God has chosen, can give man a free will.²⁵ He can never on his own merit have even the slightest part of it.

This is really Luther's completed thought on the subject of original sin. He finds that morally and spiritually man is hopelessly and totally depraved. His every act, thought, and design is bent toward himself. He is so inveterately self-centered that even his acts of kindness, goodness, and mercy toward others are acts of selfishness and consequently without merit before God. How can he obtain free will? Logically it is impossible. Man is a "mass of perdition," so debased by original sin, or by the pride of life, that he has lost all capacity for choice in matters pertaining to his own salvation.

Man's salvation, therefore, must be an act of God, who alone has free will and alone determines the ultimate destiny of every individual. In his comments on chapters eight and nine of Romans Luther presents his doctrine of double predestination as rigorously as he has already stated his thoughts on original sin. Luther teaches that God in His eternal counsels has determined to elect some human beings to everlasting bliss and to commit others to eternal damnation. None can have any advantage over anyone else in this divine plan, because it began with God's "deliberation or counsel" and it will end with His ordering.

The firmness of divine election is further established by the fact that

God permits His elect to pass through many trials, often terrifying struggles with the flesh and the devil, all to prove their election. Says Luther: "Predestination is shown by the fact that God exposes His saints to so many evils, all of which are like rapacious hands, and yet He does not let them get lost. Thereby He amply shows the firmness of His election: no creature can impede it, despite the fact that He leads the whole creature up against it."²⁶

Luther himself is a case in point. In a letter to his friend and fellow Augustinian John Lang of Erfurt, written October 26, 1516, he speaks of his extreme routine of labor. He needs two secretaries for his letters alone; he has just begun his lectures on the book of Galatians; he administers the affairs of his order; and he "struggles with the flesh, the world, and the devil."²⁷ Now in his commentary on Romans 9:17 we come upon the same words that he used in his letter to John Lang. He explains that God permitted Pharaoh to pursue the Israelites into the Red Sea in order to drive them to despair so that He might save them as His elect, and then he applies the incident in the following way: "Today He deals with His elect in the same way: In order to humble them and teach them to rely on His bare mercy, pulling down all presumptuous confidence in their willing and doing, He lets them be afflicted to the point of desperation and causes them to be persecuted by the devil, the world, and the flesh. Indeed, again and again and particularly in this our time, He incites the devil to drive His elect into horrible sins and to have dominion over them for a time, or at least constantly to obstruct their good intentions, so that they do the opposite of what they want to do, and all to such extent that they even take pride in not being able to will or to do anything good. And yet through it all, God continues to be their guide: He finally sets them free when they become hopeless and find themselves driven to despair over the fact that they want to do good and actually do so much evil and that they do not have the will or intention to do any of the good toward which they aspire. Thus, yes, thus it comes about that He 'shows His power and that His name is declared throughout all the earth.'"²⁸

It is difficult to escape the feeling that in describing the trials and temptations of the elect, Luther is also writing autobiographically. He is depicting his own struggles with the "flesh, the world, and the devil." His own condition was the more acute because of his logical conclusion that if he were not among the elect he himself was eternally damned and Christ had not died for him, for Luther follows his logic of predestination rigidly and asserts without hesitation: "Christ did not die for absolutely all, for He says: 'This is My blood which is shed for you' (Luke 22:20) and 'for many' (Mark

14:24)—He did not say: for all—"to the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28)."²⁹

But the doctrine of election is only one aspect of Luther's doctrine of predestination. This subject enters the spectrum of his thought in earnest as he expounds chapter eight of Paul's letter. Basically it grows out of his view of man's inability to do anything good or to fulfill the law. Man's curvedness toward himself forbids his doing the good; "he is bound to darkness in all his thinking and feeling." Nothing can help man out of his evil predicament. Nature is not capable of doing it; the law cannot make him attain righteousness; only "grace that is given by faith in Christ through the Holy Spirit" frees man from the brooding fear of death and hell. And man must believe that this applies to him personally as well as to the elect. Then comes the Luther axiom: "For we are and have as much as we believe. Whoever, therefore, believes with a full faith and is confident that he is a son of God, is a son of God."³⁰

Man, then, must believe that he is among the elect and that his salvation rests upon the divine purpose and not upon his own will, and "that we are saved by His immutable love" and not through our freedom of decision. It is the inflexible and firm will of His predestination "to save those who are saved." Luther continues: "This subject is not so unfathomable as one commonly believes: we should, rather, say that it is full of sweet comfort to the elect and all who have the spirit, but bitter and hard beyond measure to the prudence of the flesh."³¹

But what about the one who is overwhelmed by the fear that he is not one of the elect? Luther has comfort for such: "Let him give thanks for such fear and let him rejoice over his anxiety; he can be confident in the knowledge that God cannot lie. . . . He should be bold, therefore, and unhesitatingly rely on God's truthfulness and accept His promise and thus free himself from his former notion that God only frightens, and thus he will be saved and elected."³²

Luther argues valiantly for his viewpoint. God lets His saints pass through many evils, but He does not let them get lost. He lets the non-elect live the good life but does not save them; and conversely He lets many commit great evils, yet He saves them. All this He wills and "because He wills it so, it is not wicked." To the objection that God gave His Son for mankind and so "will have all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4), Luther replies that "Christ did not die for absolutely all men."³³ Having thus limited the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, he disposes of a further objection—that if election lies solely with God, then the reason why men sin

and are damned lies also with God—by saying, "God wills it so—for everything is His as the clay is the potter's!"³⁴

The sinner is given a final and important consolation. To the objection that since man is necessarily in sin he is wrongly condemned, Luther replies: "We are all necessarily in sin and under condemnation, but nobody is a sinner by coaction and against his will. For whoever hates sin is already outside sin and belongs to the elect. But those whom God hardens, they are the ones to whom He gives the will voluntarily to be and to stay in sin and to love wickedness. Such are unavoidably in sin by the immutability of necessity but not of coaction."³⁵

However, it cannot thus be concluded that man's will is totally bound and enslaved by the fiat of God in every act of his existence; Luther never taught that. Rather he insisted: "To be sure, it is always free according with its nature, but only with respect to that which is in its power and is inferior to it but not with respect to that which is superior to it, since it is held captive in sins and then cannot choose the good according to God."³⁶

The natural man, then, is free to choose in all his ordinary pursuits. Here he is in control and seeks himself in all things and puts himself in the place of everything, even God. The man under grace, on the other hand, puts God in the place of everything, for "grace is not content unless it sees God in and above all it sees, and it rejoices in wanting and wishing everything to have life and being in the glory of God."³⁷ This is the key to man's true freedom and every man must believe that grace is his. In a fine statement Luther sets no limits to God's grace:

"The Holy Spirit Himself, who is bestowed on us, gives testimony to our spirit by strengthening our trust in God that we are the children of God. For we are and have as much as we believe. Whoever, therefore, believes with a full faith and is confident that he is a son of God, is a son of God, for in Mark 11:24 it says: 'All things whatsoever you pray and ask for, believe that you receive them and you shall have them,' and in Matthew 9:29, 'According to your faith be it done unto you.' For whosoever by strong faith and hope is confident that he is a son of God is a son of God. But none can do this without the Spirit. . . . And this is what the apostle means when he says that a man is justified by faith (you must firmly believe that it applies to yourself, and not merely to the elect, that Christ died for your sins and gave satisfaction for them)."³⁸

In his autobiographical statement of 1545 Luther told of another serious spiritual problem. He said that he was among the "miserable sinners" who "are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue." Now,

in his comments on the "works of the law" (Romans 3:20), and "the doers of the law shall be justified" (Romans 2:13), he asserts that "justification does not need the works of the law, but it needs a living faith that produces its own works."³⁹ So far as the law concerns us, "it is the law that makes us conscious of the sin that is in us, i.e., of our ill will that inclines toward evil and shrinks back from the good. . . . For it makes us know that we are sinners and that there is sin in us, that we are evil and that there is evil in us."⁴⁰

Luther must have found the problem of the law, the works of the law, and "the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ" (Romans 3:21, 22) a very difficult one to clear up. The law is always present; it never ceases to accuse; and all its accusations must be cleared up, which none can do. Likewise every word of God and Christ must be believed; but this, too, is exceedingly difficult, nay impossible; for by "disbelieving one single word one no longer lives by the Word of God. Because the whole Christ is in every word, and he is wholly in all single words." So, to deny Christ in one word is to deny Him "in His totality."⁴¹ Who can fulfill such an order?

In this serious situation Luther falls back, as a loyal monk and priest, on the church. It has the Word of God and "every word that proceeds from the mouth of a superior or of a good and holy man, is Christ's word." And in the church the "priest's mouth and the prelate's" is as the mouth of God.⁴²

However, even with the help of the church one is not certain that he does not deny Christ. At this point Luther goes back for help to the ever available aid of the monk: "We must undergo an immense humiliation." Why? "For inasmuch as we cannot know whether we live by every word of God or deny none . . . , we can never know whether we are justified or whether we believe. For this reason, we should estimate our works as if they were works of the law and should humbly be willing to be sinners who desire to be justified only by His mercy. For even though we are certain that we believe in Christ, we are not certain that we believe in all His words. Hence, also, 'the believing in Him' is uncertain."⁴³

This is the sinner's predicament, as it was Luther's. He must believe every word of God, but he cannot be sure that he does. He must fulfill the law, but he cannot. However, be humble; he can with "fear and trembling" make "humble confession," and, lo! if he does, he "will receive the grace of justification and forgiveness" even though he has done "something from a hidden unbelief of which he was not aware."⁴⁴

Full certainty, however, is most elusive for the sinner, because "we ourselves shall always be found to do the works of the law; we shall always be

unrighteous, always sinners."⁴⁵ This is because we are proud and do not understand the kind of humility needed and think that we believe when we do not. Luther concludes that "we must leave righteousness to Christ only and only with Him works of grace and of the Spirit."⁴⁶ In a fine passage, foreshadowing the teachings of the mature Reformer, he declares: "For we are not made righteous by doing righteous deeds, but we do righteous deeds insofar as we are righteous. Therefore, grace alone makes righteous."⁴⁷

We are righteous, then, and this "righteousness is given only through faith in Jesus Christ. So it has been determined, so it pleases God, and so it will be."⁴⁸

In discussing the problem of the law and our fulfilling it and the problem of righteousness, Luther emphasizes humility, desire, and will on the part of the sinner to be righteous. Thus he can say that "the will to be righteous is a large part of righteousness," also that one who by his actions "makes himself ready for the grace of justification is in some way already righteous."⁴⁹ But he quickly limits his argument by saying that neither the good works that precede justification nor those that follow from it make a man righteous. Good works, he believes, can only prepare a person for justification,⁵⁰ and they must consist of "earnest prayer, readiness to learn, eager action, and much self-castigation. . . . For grace cannot be had unless one works on oneself in this way."⁵¹

Obviously Luther does not eliminate good works in the process of justification, at least not in his commentary on Romans. They are valuable as aids to justification. Among these aids humility is essential. At times it seems that his dialectic on these aids is in danger of limiting even his doctrine of justification by faith alone, but that is not the case. For Luther is preparing us for one of his fundamental doctrines.

God, he asserts now, does not fully justify us or make us "perfectly righteous" until this life ends in death; He only begins to perfect us in this life. Our will is so perverse, we are so "bent in and curved in upon ourselves," and our presumptuousness and pride are so marked that even our works of grace can be "changed into works of the law and the righteousness of God into the righteousness of man." For this reason, continues Luther, "no saint regards and confesses himself to be righteous, but he always asks and waits to be justified, and because of this he is reputed as righteous by God who has regard for the humble."⁵²

Luther hammers away at the thought of our being saved only in part in this life. "We are saved," he asserts, "only insofar as we . . . bewail the fact that we are beset by sin and fervently pray to God for redemption."

Therefore "we are partly and not wholly righteous," and whenever we pray that righteousness be perfected in us and our sin taken away, we are actually praying "for the end of this life."⁵³

And this is not all. In a comment on Romans 3:25—"for the remission of former sins"—Luther can say: "Now he says 'of former sins' in order to indicate that God does not forgive all sins, lest someone might say: 'If then, all sins are taken away by Christ, let us do what we want, nobody can sin anymore.'"⁵⁴

This may seem a strange comment, but Luther has a reason. For to claim freedom from sin completely would be to cancel out the law of God, something which not even God Himself chooses to do. The best that God could do with reference to His law was to give us Christ to fulfill the law. Hence while God does not punish us for past sins, He is "not kind to us in order that we may freely sin."⁵⁵ So certain is Luther on this point that he accuses the devil of urging some persons "on to the foolish enterprise of trying to become pure and sinless saints"⁵⁶ in order to challenge God's plan.

Here is Luther's cardinal doctrine of man's being simultaneously just and sinner. Only in the light of this doctrine can he say that it does us no harm to be sinners "so long as with all our strength we seek to be justified."⁵⁷

We close his argument in his own words: "So there is nothing left to us but to remain in sins and, setting our hope on the mercy of God, pray fervently that we may be freed from them. We are like a convalescent: if he is in too much of a hurry to get well, he runs the chance of suffering a serious relapse; therefore, he must let himself be cured little by little, and he must bear it for a while that he is feeble. It is enough that our sin displeases us, even though it does not entirely disappear. Christ bears all sins, if only they displease us, for then they are no longer our sins but His, and His righteousness is ours in turn."⁵⁸

And so it is that humility, perseverance, hope, and faith belong to us in this life, while to God and His Christ belongs "that righteousness by which He makes us righteous, just as the wisdom of God is that by which He makes us wise." We are sinners in fact but righteous in hope "in that our sins are covered by Christ who dwells in us."⁵⁹

In a moving autobiographical statement Luther calls himself a fool, for he did not understand this aspect of the problem of sin. "Thus I fought with myself," he says, "because I did not know that though forgiveness is indeed real, sin is not taken away except in hope, i.e., that it is in the process of being taken away by the gift of grace which starts this removal, so that it is only not reckoned as sin."⁶⁰

But Luther wants his students to understand that at the time he was lecturing to them, he had solved the problem that while this life is a life of cure from sin, it is not a life of sinlessness. The cure is not finished but goes on to the end of life, and, wonder of wonders! the troubled "soul lies down at the humanity of Christ and is covered by His righteousness."⁶¹

In view, then, of the fact that Luther's struggle with the world, the flesh, and the devil could be trials common to God's elect at all times, while conversely God permits many of the reprobate "to live a good life from the beginning and to do many good works"⁶² and yet does not save them, how certain was Luther of his own salvation as he completed the lectures on Romans in 1516? He had analyzed sin most effectively, it seems. What cure for it had he found, if any? His opening statement in his commentary on Romans carries this assurance: "God does not want to save us by our own but by an extraneous righteousness which does not originate in ourselves but comes to us from beyond ourselves, which does not arise on our earth but comes from heaven."⁶³

Does Luther in the course of his lectures do what he promises in this opening statement? If he does, his answer will be found in the commentary and within the framework of the religious thought which he presents. For it is safe to say that the commentary gives us most of the intellectual, moral, and spiritual currents that flow through his spiritual world. In Luther the Reformer these currents become torrential at times or they move deep and strong as many waters into the one body that makes up his ocean of religious thought.

In his commentary is this beautiful statement on chapter two:

"For when his own heart reproaches a Christian and accuses him by testifying against him that he has done evil, he presently turns away from it and turns to Christ and says: He made satisfaction, He is righteous, He is my defense, He died for me, He made righteousness to be mine, and made my sin His own. And if He made my sin His own, then I have it no longer, and I am free. And if He made His righteousness mine, then I am righteous in the same righteousness as He. But my sin cannot swallow Him up but is swallowed up in the infinite abyss of His righteousness, for He is God Himself to whom be praise and glory."⁶⁴

In these words we discern the Luther ring. He is no religious neophyte groping his way in the dark. He has seen light and is sure of it. And in a comment on Romans 3:5 ("But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say?") he observes: "He, therefore, does not speak here of the righteousness by virtue of which He, being

righteous, makes us righteous, and He alone is righteous with respect to us. Our righteousness, if it really has become our own (*i.e.*, if it is acknowledged and confessed), greatly sets off His divine righteousness, for it makes us humble; it makes us throw ourselves down before God and causes us to ask for His righteousness. And when we have received it, we glorify, laud, and love God as the giver."⁶⁵

He seeks further to explain how our unrighteousness can commend God's righteousness and reaches the conclusion that it can do so only as we confess our sins, saying, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned." Psalm 51:4. He continues: "We conclude, therefore, that God cannot become wise, righteous, strong, good, et cetera, in His words unless we believe Him and, yielding to Him, confess that we are foolish, unrighteous liars, weak, evil. Therefore, humility and faith are needed. This is what these words point out and affirm. We must become inwardly nothing, emptied of everything, and, completely rid of ourselves, say with the prophet: 'Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned, that Thou mayest be justified in Thy words.' To Thee I am foolish and weak in order that Thou be wise and strong in Thy words."⁶⁶ Then he concludes that God is proved righteous and truthful "when we cannot become righteous by our power and approach Him that He should make us righteous as we confess that we cannot overcome our sin. He does this when we believe His Word; for by such believing He justifies us, *i.e.*, He reputes us as righteous. This is what *we call the righteousness of faith and the righteousness which God works in us.*"⁶⁷

In his comments on Romans 3:4—"That Thou mayest be justified in Thy words"—Luther comments on the problem of the active and the passive justification of God. "Intrinsically," he says, "God and His Word are just and true." But they do not become so in us until our wisdom and knowledge "yield to them and through faith make room for them and accept them." That is, man must give up his righteousness and confess that he is sinful, untruthful, and a liar.⁶⁸ He continues: "By this 'justification of God' we are justified. And this passive justification of God by which He is declared righteous by us is our active justification by God. For He reputes as unrighteousness and damnation that unbelief by which they judge and condemn His words. . . . For He justifies . . . in His Word when He makes us such as His Word is, namely, righteous, true, wise, et cetera. And He makes us such as we believe His Word to be, namely, righteous and true."⁶⁹

From this interpretation of Romans 3:4, it is plain, says Luther, that "the passive and active justification of God and faith and trust in Him are one and the same thing. For when we acknowledge His words as righteous, He gives

Himself to us; and because of this gift, He recognizes us as righteous, i.e., He justifies us."⁷⁰

Statements such as the above indicate that at this point Luther has come a long way toward a final understanding of Romans 1:17. Later in his career he will state his interpretation of this scripture in somewhat different terms, but the essence of his great doctrine of justification by faith is far advanced in the lectures on Romans.

Thus throughout his lectures on Romans Luther analyzes in many ways and with a wealth of argument the problems of sin and righteousness. It must be admitted that he has found solutions to both problems. These solutions may undergo emendations and further clarifications of detail later in his career, but essentially they are present in this commentary. And he is sure of his positions. Thus he states, "One who believes in Christ is secure in his conscience; he is righteous and as the Scripture says, 'bold as a lion' (Proverbs 28:1)."⁷¹ And again: "One who believes in Christ does not hasten or flee; he is not frightened, because he fears nothing; he stands quiet and secure, founded upon a firm rock, according to the teaching of the Lord in Matthew 7:24."⁷²

And, in speaking of the damned who in fear call upon the mountains to fall upon them, he says: "But one who believes in Christ does not do anything of this kind; he is not confounded, and he does not blush with shame, because Christ has made him secure."⁷³

It is difficult to believe that Luther could speak to his students in terms such as these and still be personally insecure. He is still the Catholic Luther, he is still the monk, the priest, and the nominalist professor. When he becomes Luther the Reformer, he will see some of his earlier experiences and views in a different light; but he will never need to reconstruct his basic theological framework. His basic theological views are already present in his lectures on Romans. They are anchored in his concept of the gospel, "an unspeakably wonderful gift that cannot be compared with any riches, honors, or pleasures."⁷⁴

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Luther: Lectures on Romans* has received an excellent translation and editing by Wilhelm Pauck in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. 15 (Philadelphia, 1961). In these references, listed as "Romans."

2. Found in K. Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsaetze zur Kirchengeschichte I: Luther* (Tuebingen, 1927), pages 111-154.

3. See A. Kurz, *Die Heils gewissheit bei Luther* (Guetersloh, 1933), pages 120-137.

4. WA 3, p. 575; *Romans*, pp. 8, 43, 48, 64, 70, 99, 105, 208, 329, 139.

5. Romans p. 5.
6. Romans, pp. 3, 4.
7. Romans, p. 4.
8. Romans, p. 5.
9. Romans, p. 5.
10. Romans, p. 235.
11. Romans, p. 329.
12. Romans, p. 70.
13. Romans, pp. 98, 99.
14. Romans, p. 353.
15. Romans, p. 307.
16. Romans, pp. 126, 402.
17. Romans, pp. 167, 168.
18. Romans, p. 168.
19. Romans, pp. 218, 219.
20. Romans, p. 210.
21. Romans, p. 90.
22. Romans, p. 3.
23. Romans, p. 138.
24. Romans, p. 138.
25. Romans, p. 252.
26. Romans, p. 251.
27. LW 48, p. 28. Letter to John Lang, October 26, 1516.
28. Romans, p. 273.
29. Romans, p. 252.
30. Romans, p. 234, Note 29.
31. Romans, p. 247.
32. Romans, p. 254.
33. Romans, p. 252.
34. Romans, p. 253.
35. Romans, pp. 252, 253.
36. Romans, p. 252.
37. Romans, pp. 219, 220.
38. Romans, p. 234 and Note 29.
39. Romans, p. 102.
40. Romans, p. 107.
41. Romans, p. 105.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. *Ibid.*
47. Romans, p. 108.
48. Romans, p. 109.
49. Romans, p. 107.
50. Romans, p. 108.
51. Romans, p. 111.
52. Romans, p. 113.
53. Romans, p. 114.
54. Romans, p. 116.
55. *Ibid.*
56. Romans, p. 121.

57. *Ibid.*
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Romans*, p. 132.
60. *Romans*, pp. 128, 129.
61. *Romans*, p. 132.
62. *Romans*, p. 251.
63. *Romans*, p. 4.
64. *Romans*, p. 54.
65. *Romans*, p. 67.
66. *Romans*, p. 70.
67. *Romans*, p. 72. *Italics ours.*
68. *Romans*, p. 77.
69. *Ibid.*
70. *Romans*, p. 78.
71. *Romans*, p. 282.
72. *Romans*, p. 283.
73. *Romans*, p. 285.
74. *Romans*, p. 419.

Discovery



If to Luther's lectures on the Psalms (1513-1515) and on Romans (1515-1516) we add those on Galatians (1516) and on Hebrews (1517-1518), we have the main body of exegetical works given during the period of his life which Karl A. Meissinger has discussed under the title *The Catholic Luther*.¹ During years of serious study and lecturing he had grown into a mature and important theologian in the Augustinian Order but without any universal following or fame.

As a young and critical Ockhamist he had not gone beyond the bounds of academic license permitted a professor of theology of his day. He was an innovator, but the church had seen many such in its long history, and some of these, like Thomas Aquinas and William of Ockham, had occasioned serious doctrinal clashes within the church. During these years he had come under the influence of such potent forces as Augustine's theology, the varied shades of Catholic mysticism, and, most important, the Bible, acquiring from it a vast knowledge. His lectures were, strictly speaking, a great compilation of Bible texts that elucidated the verse or verses of Scripture on which he was commenting at a given moment.

Scholars see generally in these materials a theologian who was re-creating slowly the meaning of apostolic Christianity. Basic in this process of reinterpretation must stand Paul's statements in Romans 1:17: "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written: 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" RSV. Luther had known this text from earliest time. He had commented on it in the course of his lectures on Lombard's *Sentences* (1509-1511), and he had used it in lecturing on the Psalms; but, strangely, five years later in his lectures on Romans he passed by the text without referring to his own great struggle over its meaning or

even giving a clear-cut exposition of this fundamental scripture. Instead, he emphasized the virtue of humility as a way to God. The question therefore remains: When did Luther arrive at a final understanding of this text?²

The world of Luther scholarship is sharply divided on the time of a matter which Luther forgot to date but which he himself considered of utmost importance in his career. He was in fact, the first one to speak of his "tower experience" and said that it came to him neither in Rome nor in Erfurt, but in his tower study in the Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg.

This is how he related the incident in 1532, years afterward: "These words 'righteous' and 'righteousness of God' struck my conscience as flashes of lightning, frightening me each time I heard them: If God is righteous, He punishes. But by the grace of God, as I once meditated upon these words in this tower and heated room: 'the righteous shall live by his faith' and 'the righteousness of God,' there suddenly came into my mind the thought that if we as righteous are to live by faith, and if the righteousness of faith is to be for salvation to everyone who believes, then it is not our merit, but the mercy of God. Thus my soul was refreshed, for it is the righteousness of God by which we are justified and saved through Christ. These words became more pleasant to me. Through this word the Holy Spirit enlightened me in this tower."³

Four times in all Luther referred in his *Table Talk* to his "tower experience." Clearly, it was an important matter in his religious life, marking the end of a long, stormy, serious struggle. He stated this more fully in the preface to the first edition of his Latin writings in 1545, where he summarized the events that led him into his lifework as Reformer.

Luther opens his autobiographic statement with Tetzel's sale of indulgences in 1517 and his own protests against the traffic. He mentions his summons to meet Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in 1518, the coming of Melanchthon to Wittenberg "to teach Greek literature" in the same year, Emperor Maximilian's death in 1519, and his debate with John Eck in Leipzig in June, 1519. Then, launching into the heart of his story, he remarks about "how hard it is to struggle out of and emerge from errors which have by long habit become a part of nature, as it were." Then he says: "I had then already read and taught the Sacred Scriptures most diligently privately and publicly for seven years, so that I knew them nearly all by memory. I had also acquired the beginning of the knowledge of Christ and faith in Him, i.e., not by works but by faith in Christ are we made righteous and saved."⁴

Luther continues to recount the events of 1519. He meets Karl von Miltitz, who urges him "profusely to be reconciled with the pope," but without any

permanent results. Then he continues: "Meanwhile, I had already during that year [1519] returned to interpret the Psalter anew. I had confidence in the fact that I was more skillful, after I had lectured in the university on St. Paul's epistles to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the one to the Hebrews. I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans. But till then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in Chapter 1(:17), 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed,' that had stood in my way. For I hated that word 'righteousness of God,' which, according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

"Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners; and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, 'As if it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!' Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

"At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely, by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us; the power of God, with which he makes us strong; the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

"And I exrolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.' Thus that place

in Paul was for me truly the gate to paradise. Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he, too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when He justifies us. . . . Armed more fully with these thoughts, I began a second time to interpret the Psalter. And the work would have grown into a large commentary, if I had not again been compelled to leave the work begun, because Emperor Charles V in the following year convened the diet at Worms.⁵

This most exhaustive declaration ever made by Luther concerning his own spiritual problems, places the "tower experience" as taking place sometime in 1518. His statement is clear-cut, precise, moving, and bears no trace, as has been charged against him, of a faulty memory. But it does raise serious difficulties of interpretation. If Luther did not fully understand Romans 1:17 until 1518, what are we to do with his serious discussions of sin and righteousness in his lectures on the Psalms, especially Psalm 31 and Psalm 71, where he was surely working toward an understanding of this scripture, and, more specifically, his lucid, careful, and incisive comments on sin and righteousness in comments on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, where we meet his virtually complete framework of religious thought? For by 1518 Luther had formulated his views on such subjects as original sin, election and predestination, at the same time just and sinner, the law and the gospel, the hidden God, and the theology of the cross. It seems difficult to assert that he did not understand Romans 1:17 and yet had already developed a firm belief on these fundamental doctrines in his theology. Actually, it places last the full discovery of his great doctrine of righteousness by faith alone in his religious development into a Reformer. It would, then, form the capstone in the spiritual arch which he had been building.

Nonetheless Luther does just that in his great biographic statement. Further, in the many statements about his own religious development there is not one that indicates an early final solution of this spiritual problem. Thus he says: "I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to go ever deeper and deeper where my temptations took me."⁶ He likens himself to Augustine and asserts: "I was all alone and one of those who have become proficient by writing and teaching."⁷ In another striking self-appraisal we hear him say, "Living, nay dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculation."⁸

As an illustration of Luther's slow development we may take the incident of his climbing the sacred stairs in Rome on his knees early in 1511. As he straightened up at the top he said to himself, "Who knows if this is so?"

Clearly, he was reflecting on good works as a factor in salvation. Years later, in a sermon, he said that when he became a doctor (in October, 1512) he "did not yet know that we cannot expiate our sins."⁹ And in a letter to a fellow Augustinian monk, Spenlein by name, written April 8, 1516, he brought up the subject of good works and the impossibility of man's performing them in order to stand before God "clothed in his own righteousness." Then he reminded Spenlein that once he held this error and added that he himself also held it, and was "still fighting against the error without having conquered it yet."¹⁰ As Luther wrote this letter he was deep in his lectures on Romans; yet there were statements throughout this commentary which indicate that he could still assign considerable value to good works as an aid in preparing man for God's righteousness. Like the Latins of old, Luther made haste slowly.

In his *Table Talk*, dating from the year 1532, he said that as a monk he was an expert at allegorizing. "I allegorized everything," he exclaimed, meaning that he used the fourfold method of exegesis in commenting on each text of Scripture. Then he remarked that in the lectures on Romans he got "some knowledge of Christ" and understood that the true meaning of Christ's work did not lie in allegorizing about Him.¹¹ In 1525, in his treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, he indicated that this change of method of interpreting Scripture was an important turn in his life. Here he accused his former colleague, Andrew Karlstadt, of "spiritual juggling" with words and texts and told his readers: "I was thoroughly drilled in this method when I first began to study the Bible ten years ago, before I discovered the true method. I too would carelessly say: 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth,' Genesis 1(:1): Heaven refers to the angels and the spiritual creatures; earth refers to the bodily creatures."¹²

Observe how much emphasis Luther assigned to the true or natural meaning of the text. He did not understand Christ's work until he changed his method of exegesis, and this he began to do in the commentary on Romans. In 1516-1517 he gave up the allegorical method for the literal sense of the text.

In *The Bondage of the Will*, which appeared in 1525, there is a little-noted statement that bears directly on Luther's early development. Speaking of the canonical Scriptures as the only true source of authority in religious debate, Luther referred to what the learned Fathers and Biblical scholars of the church say on the subject of free will; then he went on to say: "I grant, my good Erasmus, that you may well be influenced by these considerations. For more than ten years they so influenced me that I should not think any

other mortal was ever so deeply moved by them. I, too, thought it incredible that this Troy of ours, so often assaulted and so long unconquered, could ever be taken. And I call God witness against my soul, that I would have continued so, and would be under their influence today, had not constraint of conscience and evidence of facts forced me on to a different road."¹³

In this statement Luther was dealing with the method and arguments used by the scholars of the church when they wrote on the subject of free will. Rejecting these arguments, he nevertheless admitted that "for more than ten years" he was under their influence and was, indeed, deeply moved by them.

What was the new road that Luther was forced to travel after conscience and facts had taken charge of his destiny? To this question there can be but one answer: the road of the Reformation. Up until the time Luther posted his ninety-five theses on indulgences on October 31, 1517, he had been an unknown professor at the small university of Wittenberg, situated on the rim of German civilization. But after his attack he soon became a national, and shortly thereafter an international, figure.

The fact that Luther entered upon his career as Reformer in 1517 was not apparent to him at the time. According to his own testimony he did not yet fully understand the text that was to become the key scripture in his theology and his work as a Reformer. This seems strange, indeed, since he had known and studied Romans 1:17 for years and had repeatedly commented on the subject of the righteousness of God in lucid, moving, even exultant speech. To be sure, during these years of study and lecturing he had committed most of the Scriptures to memory, and had "acquired the beginning of the knowledge of Christ and faith in Him, *i.e.*, not by works but by faith in Christ are we made righteous and saved." Nevertheless, he was not satisfied with his understanding of this verse. He says that he had lectured on Romans (1515-1516), Galatians (1516), and Hebrews (1517-1518), and that he had been "captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans," but that a "single word in Chapter 1(:17) had stood" in his way. He says he hated that word "righteousness of God," that he raged with a "fierce and troubled conscience," that he beat "importunately upon Paul at that place," and that he meditated "day and night" until its meaning became clear to him "by the mercy of God."¹⁴

But now hatred and despair gave way to joy and exultation. He felt born again, as though he had "entered paradise itself through open gates." Later he consulted Augustine's treatise on *The Spirit and the Letter* and found, contrary to expectation, that he, too, gives a similar interpretation to Romans

I:17, namely, that God's righteousness is that "with which God clothes us when He justifies us."¹⁵

This is Luther's account of the great discovery. It leaves no doubt about when it happened. Luther did not even mention his first lectures on the Psalms, but he did emphasize the fact that after his lectures on Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews, and after his discovery of the full meaning of Romans 1:17, he was "armed more fully with these thoughts" and so "began a second time to interpret the Psalter."¹⁶ Then, early in 1519, he began this series, intending to write a large commentary. His tower experience, therefore, must have come while he was assembling the notes and materials for the second commentary on the Psalms, or before 1519, there being no possibility of assigning to it a specific date.

His pronouncement concerning the tower experience has greatly disturbed many students of Luther's spiritual development. They assert that he erred in stating the sequence of events, that his understanding of Romans 1:17 had come earlier, even as early as his lectures on the Psalms, and that his reference to reading Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter* after his own illumination, is mistaken because he had studied and used it already in his lectures. His memory just failed in 1545, it is asserted, when he recounted his early spiritual problems and their solutions.

In preceding chapters we have indicated how very much of Luther's theological framework is to be found in his pre-Reformation lectures from 1509 to 1518. Students of Luther's development point with considerable justification to the fact that by the time he finished his commentary on Romans he had built into his pattern of religious thought the essential doctrines of his later career as Reformer. They say that the many statements in his lectures on the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews on sin and righteousness are proofs that he understood Romans 1:17 and had experienced the tower illumination long before 1518.

But Luther took a different view of his early efforts as a theologian as well as of his own understanding of Romans 1:17. His first commentary on the Psalter he likened to "triflings and sponges," a surprising evaluation to us when we read the numerous penetrating statements on Christian doctrine found there. While he lectured on Romans he received "some knowledge of Christ," an observation which indicates a limited understanding of Paul's message in the epistle. And he was critical even of his second series of lectures on the Psalter, begun early in 1519. He called them "immature theology," but added quickly that "the point of justification . . . was handled correctly."¹⁷ This may imply that in 1519 he was clear on the subject of

justification by faith, whereas earlier he had not been.

This is borne out further by the manner in which Luther used Augustine after the tower experience. In his autobiographical statement of 1545 he says that after he, "by the mercy of God," had reached an understanding of Romans 1:17 and so had entered "paradise itself through open gates," he read Augustine's interpretation of the verse and found, "contrary to hope," that he, too, had given the passage a meaning similar to his own. Then he immediately began to question some aspects of Augustine's doctrine of imputation of righteousness but was pleased that on Romans 1:17 he and Augustine were in virtual agreement.¹⁸

It is certain that in his lectures on Romans Luther did not question the authority of Augustine. He quoted him upwards of ninety times, never disapprovingly. His disagreement with Augustine began with his tower experience, a point about which he was most emphatic: "Since I understood Paul, I have had but little regard for any doctor [of the church]. They have become of little consequence to me. At first I did not just read Augustine, I devoured him; but when the door to Paul opened to me and I understood the meaning of justification by faith, then I was done with him."¹⁹ And on another occasion he said that "many books by Augustine are useless."²⁰

These strictures on Augustine are significant. Luther stated in so many words that when he truly understood the "meaning of justification by faith," that is, "when the door to Paul" opened to him, he also lost his high regard for Augustine. He used him less and less, as is borne out in his writings. Thus, in the lectures on Galatians, given in 1516 but published in 1519, Luther quoted Augustine over fifty times, while in his great lectures on the same epistle given in 1531 and published in 1535, he mentioned or quoted this church father only sixteen times.²¹

We must conclude, therefore, from the remarkably consistent utterances of Luther concerning his full understanding of Romans 1:17 that it came late in his pre-Reformation career, after his posting of the ninety-five theses, but before he began the second series of lectures on the Psalter early in 1519. His own statement in the "Preface" in 1545 must be taken at face value. Not to do so is to charge the Reformer not so much with a faulty memory as with a distortion of the most important fact and event in his career, namely, his breakthrough as Reformer. For what Luther found in his tower experience is nothing less than a rediscovery of the gospel of apostolic Christianity, which lay hidden for him in Romans 1:17 until "by the mercy of God" he understood the context of these words: "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'"²²

Martin Luther's Religious Thought

Here is the real birth hour of the Reformation. Without it Luther could never have founded evangelical Christianity in the sixteenth century.

In his *Luther Discovers the Gospel*, Uuras Saarnivaara distinguishes Luther's conversion, which he puts in the latter part of 1512, from his discovery of the true meaning of Romans 1:17, which he places in the summer of 1518. The early date points to the first great crisis of Luther, which lay chiefly in how he could be assured "that God truly forgave his sins when absolution was proclaimed to him." Here the counsels of Staupitz were invaluable in aiding him "to appropriate the assurance of forgiveness of sins as pronounced by Staupitz." Later in his life Luther said of these experiences that "the light of the gospel began to shine" for him and that he "ate the firstfruits of faith and the knowledge of Christ."²³

There is merit in Saarnivaara's argument. A careful study of Luther's treatment of sin and righteousness in his lectures from 1509 to 1517 tells us how very carefully and slowly he made his way in creating a theological framework within which he could live and labor the rest of his life. It was, indeed, a long and arduous process, punctuated by spells of great spiritual anguish when to the struggling priest and monk God above seemed hidden in a closed heaven, while hell below yawned open for him.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Karl A. Meissinger, *Der katholische Luther* (Munich, 1952).
2. On this question there is much difference of opinion. Luther's own son, Paul Luther, as well as Melanchthon, Luther's first biographer, placed the discovery early, even before his visit to Rome in 1510-1511. Others place it between the time he took the doctoral degree in October, 1512, and the beginning of his lectures on the Psalms in 1513. A large group finds the discovery in the course of these lectures, even pinpointing the experience with Psalm 31 and, more specifically, Psalm 71. Still others see Luther's full understanding of Romans 1:17 as occurring just before or during the course of his lectures on Romans. More recently, such serious and capable authorities as Franz Lau and Gerhard Ritter have cautioned against a cut-and-dried view of Luther's spiritual development. [F. Lau, *Luther*, trans. R. H. Fischer (Philadelphia, 1963); G. Ritter, *Luther: His Life and Works*, trans. J. Riches (New York, 1963).] Lau thinks that he had come to a "genuine assurance of salvation" by 1517 as reflected in his lectures on Hebrews, but on the larger problem of his spiritual struggles for certainty he says: "We are reduced to the sober acknowledgment that we cannot set up a calendar of Luther's inner development." [Lau *op. cit.* 67.] Many contemporary authorities on Luther would join in this view, and some would say that the whole matter of his discovery has been overplayed. There may have been even a series of discoveries, and something of a case could be made for such a view.

The whole matter of dating Luther's discovery of finding justification by faith has been given a different interpretation by still another group of scholars. They hold that Luther's experience of understanding Romans 1:17 falls late, as late as 1518-1519. Catholic authorities have generally led out in this view, but they have been and are being joined by Protestants. Together they assert that Luther did not express cer-

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tainty of salvation in his lectures on the Psalms, on Romans, on Galatians, or on Hebrews. They insist that the discovery came during the stormy period following his attack on indulgences in 1517 and the beginning of his second series of lectures on the Psalms early in 1519 or even later. Among these are: H. Grisar in *Luther* (1911), E. Reiter, *Martin Luthers Umwelt*, etc. (1941), C. Stange, *Der johanneische Typus der Heilslehre Luthers* (1949), A. Gyllenkrok, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung*, etc. (1952), E. Bizer, *Fides ex auditu* (1958 and 1961), and K. Aland, *Der Weg zur Reformation* (1965). The latest to join this group is Kurt Aland, who does not hesitate to place Luther's tower experience right into his breakthrough as Reformer. See page 109 of Aland's book.

3. H. J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), page 28.
4. LW 34, p. 334.
5. LW 34, pp. 336-338. Brackets ours.
6. WA TR 1, No. 352.
7. LW 34, p. 338.
8. WA 5, p. 153.
9. WA 45, p. 86.
10. LW 48, p. 12.
11. WA TR 1, p. 335.
12. LW 40, p. 190.
13. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, trans. *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will* (London, 1957), page 110.
14. LW 34, p. 337.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. WA TR 2, No. 1572, May, 1532.
18. LW 34, p. 337.
19. WA TR 1, No. 347, Autumn 1532.
20. WA TR 4, No. 4029, Sept. 30, 1538. See Kurt Aland, *Der Weg zur Reformation*, pages 81-84.
21. See LW, Vols. 26, 27. The commentary of 1531 is more than twice as long as that of 1516; yet it refers but sixteen times to Augustine.
22. LW 34, p. 337.
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God

M

Martin Luther experienced great difficulty in finding a satisfying understanding of the problem of God. When, after years of struggle, often in fear and trembling, he found the key to his final concept of God in Romans 1:17, he claimed that it was the "mercy of God," that is, divine intervention, that gave him full illumination and so opened to him the gates of paradise.

The reasons for his difficulty can be found in two general areas: his personality and his theological training.

His nature presents powerful opposites. Though he was plain and simple, great men regarded his personality as having powerful paradoxes and strange complexes. On occasions he showed marked weakness and indulgence as well as unbelievable stubbornness. Conflict was his element, but he loved the peace of home and of family, the beauty of nature, and he could be remarkably gracious toward the needy and suffering. Basically conservative, he showed a radical strain that often appeared in his actions and led to misunderstanding. He concerned himself chiefly with deep ethical and religious problems, in which he showed original solution and daring action. His soul was volcanic, and when his opinions were challenged he not infrequently descended to the low and the brutal in billingsgate.

Much has been written about his courage. It was truly remarkable. But his trait of humility was equally pronounced. In this he had been trained from childhood and in this schooled as a monk. His lectures on the Psalms and Romans abound in emphasis on this virtue, and they convince us that humility in Luther amounted to much more than a professional monastic preoccupation as a way to God. It was an integral part of his search for a gracious God.

Basic in his character was his inborn honesty. Above all else he must be

honest with himself. When he did not find spiritual certainty in his religious acts and offices as monk, priest, and professor, he assumed that it was his fault. He had forgotten this detail, he had fasted insufficiently, he had omitted this part, and so on.

So he put ever more of himself into the daily routine until he exhausted the entire salvation machinery of the medieval church in search of a gracious God. It brought him only disappointment, anguish, and despair. Did he not belong to the eternally damned? Luther answered the question in open blasphemy of the Almighty. He hated God. He raged "with a fierce and troubled conscience."¹

The second aspect of Luther's problem of God is his theological training.

The point of departure in Luther's theological development is undoubtedly to be sought in nominalism, or Ockhamism, as found in the orderly and well-constructed works of Gabriel Biel (d. 1495), professor of theology at the University of Tübingen and leader in Upper Germany of the quasi-monastic movement known as the "Modern Devotion" (*Devotio Moderna*). While Biel at times differed from William Ockham (1280-1349), founder of the system, he was essentially a strong and brilliant expositor of Ockhamism, and it was through him that Luther was introduced to Ockham's theology, which prevailed in the Erfurt theological faculty when Luther became a student there.² As early as 1506-07, perhaps, he labored on Biel's *The Canon of the Mass*. Melanchthon, furthermore, stated that Luther knew Biel's writings almost from memory. Luther acknowledged his debt to both. The former he called "my dear master" as late as 1530, and in 1520 he spoke of him as "without doubt the chief and most penetrating of the scholastic doctors."³ As for Biel, though Luther came to stand in radical opposition to his doctrine of faith and grace, he considered him "excellent" in other matters.⁴

Both of these scholastics embraced an extreme form of nominalism. Essentially their quarrel was with the great theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas (1225?-1274). In *Summa Theologica* he had used Aristotelian methods of argument to establish Plato's theory of ideas, or universals, in order to explain religious doctrine. This, Ockham was convinced, was in error. Instead, he maintained that ideas, or universals, exist in names alone and result only from sense experience with things, or particulars, hence nominalism. In Ockham's mind, as well as in Biel's, the logical method of Aquinas did not provide incontestable proofs of religious doctrines, which, he asserted, must be accepted solely by faith in divine revelation. Thus reason had no ultimate validity in the realm of religion to establish doctrine but only in the realm of nature to establish facts.

Nominalism's doctrine of God differs sharply from that of Thomas Aquinas. Gone is Aquinas's orderly Creator-God, the Uncaused Cause, the Unmoved Mover, the Supreme Governor, *et al.* Ockham would have none of this. Reason cannot prove it; faith only can establish God's existence. To be sure, Ockham said that God can be proved by the argument of the first cause, but he did not emphasize the point. Instead, Ockham's faith-doctrine of God postulates a Being of unlimited, unsearchable, pure will, who willed that everything be as it is. But He could have willed otherwise. Thus, according to Ockham, He could have opened heaven to sinners and consigned saints to hell, or, to pursue the thought farther, He could have reversed the order in any problem involving good and evil; He could destroy the man who loves Him, and save the sinner who hates Him, and be right in either case; He could order selfishness to be just and unselfishness to be evil without violating any eternal norm of action. Ockham believed that God's mode of action is completely based on contingency.

Thus the God established by nominalism has in Himself the element of caprice. How can such a God be trusted? How can any sinner know when he has fulfilled the requirements for receiving God's grace? Or, can a sinner ever do enough to merit divine favor? Is not man, the sinner, absolutely helpless and only a pawn in the hands of such a God? These questions, and others, forced themselves on Luther as he struggled to find a gracious God.

But he could not find Him. He tells us that during his life in Romanism he "always looked upon Christ as Judge."⁵ This had been, in fact, his attitude toward God from his boyhood, when he paled and trembled at the mention of the name of Christ because he saw in Him the Judge of all.⁶ This does not mean that Luther was preoccupied solely with thinking that the Christ whom the church worships is the Judge only, because he tells us that often he confessed with his lips that Christ had redeemed us from the servitude and the tyranny of the law, but in reality, he adds, he was fully convinced that Christ was a legislator, a tyrant, and a judge more formidable than Moses.⁷ He knew that it was Christ who would sit in judgment, and in his fear over this fact he had fled to Mary and the saints to find an intercessor and a defender.⁸ And when he explains later that under the papacy he had learned nothing except to look upon Christ as the stern Judge who rewards everyone according to his works and merits, he expresses in pregnant terms the idea of God and Christ which he derived from nominalism. As a monk Luther was controlled by the thought that God and Christ are one in the execution of judgment, and so he applied his concept of God to Christ directly.

The Roman Catholic scholar Denifle has seized upon these statements by

Luther and accused him of saying falsely that the church saw Christ as the Judge only.⁹ No doubt Luther used inadequate language to describe the correct view of the church on this point; but when as Reformer he related his spiritual problems as monk, he often used sweeping assertions to describe the depth of his anguish and his fierce struggle with the problem of sin. For in Luther's view, the God, or the Christ, who could create man for eternal damnation and who makes impossible demands upon man only to punish him, cannot be a good God but is in His fierce anger a devil.

Actually, in these struggles Luther was waging war with the Almighty. It was not his choice; he felt that he could not flee the wrath of God because God had willed His wrath upon him and His will is inescapable. It involved the terrible struggle over predestination and caused Luther sufferings "so great and so much like hell that no tongue could adequately express them, no pen could describe them, and no one who had not himself experienced them could believe them."¹⁰

Luther really never overcame this early concept of God. In 1519, after he had found a gracious God, he could say: "If I enter upon these thoughts [of earlier struggles], I forget all that Christ and God is, and I consider God a demon and a hangman."¹¹

Years later, as he thought back on these trials, he gave a strange turn to them. God, he said, cannot be God without first being the devil; we cannot enter heaven without first descending to hell; to be children of God, we must first be children of the devil. "For all that God says and does, that must the devil have said and done. In a word, the devil is and will be no devil, unless he has first been God. I must for a short hour let the devil be divine, and assign to our God the devil's role."¹² In these near blasphemous terms Luther was generalizing his own terrifying agony in his previous struggles with God for certainty of salvation.

Clearly, Luther's problem of a gracious God could not be solved by his inner struggles or his own spiritual practices. The solution had to come from without, from the very God against whom he had murmured and waged warfare, from the Bible as illuminated by the Spirit. Here nominalism gave Luther invaluable help. Ockham and Biel differentiated sharply between reason and revelation. According to Ockham's first cause, the Bible is the only source for a knowledge of things divine, and man must be unreservedly subject to its infallible authority. Both of these scholastics demanded a thorough knowledge of the Bible, as did the Augustinian Order, and Luther was irresistibly drawn to the Scriptures whose sole authority he acknowledged from the beginning of his career as monk in 1505. Strange as it may seem to us, it was

the Bible that caused all his anguish of mind and soul because he could not find in it the God he sought after but only a God of judgment. And when he by the "mercy of God" found the true God of the Bible, he likened the moment to entering open gates to Paradise. His Reformation concept of God had been revealed to him by God Himself.

Luther's personal experience in finding a gracious God had been so overwhelming and paradoxical in its nature as to leave a lasting imprint on his soul. Fear and trembling continued to characterize his relationship to God. But it was no longer the fear and trembling that led to despair; it was now a fear and trembling based on hope and assurance of God's wondrous love, so great that it included Luther in its mission of saving men.

Luther's doctrine of God takes us first to his lectures on the Psalms, 1513-1515. Here in his comments on Psalm 18:11, 12 we meet his earliest known canon on God. He explains that when "He made darkness His covering around Him" (v. 11), God actually hid His deity in the humanity of Christ, that is, the mystery of the incarnation was the hidden God revealed in Christ. This is a basic thought in Luther's doctrine of God. He in His majesty and splendor is hidden to humans. All His works are completely hidden and impossible of human comprehension. Reason is of no help in understanding God; only faith can grasp the fact that God rules, conquers the devil and death, and opens heaven to those whom He will save. And all His acts of power, grace, and mercy are bound up in Christ who became flesh, suffered, died, and rose again. In the mystery of the incarnation the believing soul can see and find the hidden God.

But the mystery of the incarnation is found only in the Scriptures. God hides Himself in the Word to all except those who believe on Christ. The Word and faith go together in Luther's theology. They are the same, for "without the Word faith is impossible,"¹³ and without faith the Word has no meaning. Faith unites the heart of the believer with the Word. It makes him "simply hang on" to the Word in moments of doubt and temptation as he "hears" its message through the medium of the Spirit. The letters and the words of the Scriptures have no meaning in themselves. The carnal man cannot understand them just as he cannot understand the cross of Christ. They are the veil behind which God is hidden except to the elect to whom he gives understanding and faith. Thus he reveals himself in the humanity of Christ. That "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) is God's revelation of Himself to man through the Scriptures.

Finally, the hidden God reveals Himself in the church under the form of its spiritual acts and doctrines. The church completes the revelation of God

to man, but again only those who live in the Spirit and not in the flesh can understand the mysteries. The carnal mind is attached only to things visible; the spiritual mind clings to things hidden.¹⁴ How these two types of mind can exist at the same time Luther did not explain at this time.

Essentially, Luther's early doctrine of God would remain with him through life. There was nothing in this view of the Deity that the medieval church had not heard or approved in its long history. Characteristic of Luther is his emphasis on Christ as the revealer of the hidden God entering our world as a God abundant in mercy and salvation. In Christ He founded a kingdom of grace that is in the world but not of the world; the world of the flesh and sin has no part in this divine enterprise but stands in judgment both in time and eternity. To this world of the flesh God remains ever hidden and is ever an avenging Judge.¹⁵

But Luther's statement on the hidden God as based on Psalm 18:11, 12, though basic, by no means exhausts his theology on the subject. In his subsequent utterances we come upon variations of expression that seem to complicate his early view on the subject. In 1524 his important treatise, *The Bondage of the Will*, appeared, directed against the great humanist Erasmus, who had attacked him in an able argument on behalf of the freedom of the human will. In his slashing reply, as Luther marshalled his arguments for divine predestination, he could not escape discussing his doctrine of the hidden God. He charged Erasmus with being deceived by his own ignorance in that he "made no distinction between God preached and God hidden, that, between the Word of God and God Himself,"¹⁶ going on to say that "God does many things which He does not show us in His Word, and He wills many things which He does not in His Word shows us that He wills."

This statement would seem to be at least a modification of the earlier doctrine of God which Luther stated in his exegesis of Psalm 18:11, 12. But this analysis distinguishes between the Word, or God preached, and God Himself, that is, God hidden, who acts apart from the Word in many ways. With the God who is "not preached, nor revealed, nor worshiped by us" we have no concern. "He is in His own nature and majesty" highly exalted, and "we have nothing to do with Him" in this respect. Even the fact that God, according to Romans 1:18-32, reveals Himself to all men in nature does not lessen the fact of His being a hidden God to the natural, sinful man. This is one side of Luther's argument of the hidden God. He has revealed Himself in nature; but man, born in original sin, has forthwith made God into an "idol of the heart" whom he worships as a false god. Actually it is the devil, the father and teacher of evil, whom the natural man worships, while God

remains ever hidden to him. "All creation has been given to lift up and enlighten man," Luther argued, "but man uses it to blind and cripple himself. Therefore God, in turn, uses all creation to blind and cripple man. . . . Those who follow opinion, reason, wisdom, and knowledge are offended by all this and perish."¹⁷ God, then, remains hidden to the godless, that is, to such as are without faith. Even nature, made to reveal Him, has become an impenetrable covering for Him except to those who have faith.

This by no means exhausts Luther's concept of the hidden God, the God who is "nor preached, nor revealed, nor worshiped by us." He found God particularly hidden in the course of world events and history where He rules and directs in all the affairs of evil and godless men. Luther saw the evidence of this fact in the Scriptures; and in his commentary on Mary's hymn of praise, *The Magnificat*, found in Luke 1:46-55, he expounded upon the subject at some length in dealing with verses 51, 52.

Luther's translation of these verses has been rendered as follows: "He has shown strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted those of low degree."¹⁸ And here is Luther's comment: "In the Scriptures, the 'arm' of God means God's own power by which He works without the medium of any creature. This work is done quietly and in secret . . . and without the semblance of power."¹⁹

When God works thus, no one is "aware of it until all is accomplished." Only faith can sense what is happening, but even faith cannot understand, for God is working without the means of any creature, "with His own arm."

"Then a thing is destroyed or raised up before one knows it, and no one sees it done. Such works as these He does only among the two divisions of mankind, the godly and the wicked. He lets the godly become powerless and to be brought low, until everyone supposes their end is near, whereas in these very things He is present to them with all His power, yet so hidden and secret that even those who suffer the oppression do not feel it but only believe."²⁰

Luther continues that in such experiences as these God employs the fullness of His power and "His outstretched arm," but man can only have faith and wait on God; he cannot understand what the hidden God is doing.

But what of the other half of mankind? Luther's answer is clear. God lets the sinners "become great and mightily to exalt themselves." Then "He withdraws His power from them and lets them puff themselves up in their own power alone. . . . When their bubble is full-blown, and everyone supposes them to have won and overcome, and they themselves feel smug in their achievement, then God pricks the bubble, and it is all over. The poor

dupes do not know that even while they are puffing themselves up and growing strong they are forsaken by God, and God's arm is not with them."²¹

The end result, then, of God's hiding Himself to both saints and sinners differs vastly. To the former He is ever near to bring eventual comfort and joy; to the latter He remains far removed to bring ruin to their exaltation. Luther concludes: "These, then, are the two contrary works of God, from which we learn that He is minded to be far from the wise and prudent and near to the foolish and those compelled to be in the wrong. This makes God worthy of love and praise and comforts soul and body and all our powers."²²

From Luther's doctrine of how the hidden God deals with saints and sinners as classes on earth, it is only a step to describe how he deals with rulers and nations in history. In Luke 1:52, where Mary said, "He has put down the mighty from their seats," he is given the opening for his view of God in history. He expounds: "We see in all histories and in experience that He puts down one kingdom and exalts another, lifts up one principality and casts down another, increases one people and destroys another; as He did with Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, though they thought they would sit in their seats forever."²³

The God who intervenes so decisively in the affairs of nations is the hidden God. Luther is thus expanding his thinking on God's dealing with the evil "half of mankind" to include evil nations in history. God does not destroy nations because they employ "reason, wisdom, and right" in creating governments, or in building empires, or in producing cultures; "but He does destroy pride and the proud, who use these things for selfish ends, enjoy them, do not fear God, but persecute the godly and the divine right by means of them, and thus abuse the fair gifts of God and turn them against Him."²⁴

So deep is the cosmic struggle that Luther is describing that it is ever unavoidable. "Truth and right must always be assailed by the wise, the mighty, and the rich, that is, by the world with its greatest and best ability. . . . The learned, saintly, mighty, great and rich, and the best that the world has must fight against God and the right, and be the devil's own."²⁵

The awful and terrifying ways which the hidden God uses in His dealings with saints and sinners seem at times almost to fascinate Luther. He calls them God's game which He is "wont to play" with His saints because He wishes them only well.²⁶ Luther likens the rise and fall of principalities and empires to God's "tournaments and knights" who fight and go under,²⁷ or he calls them "God's mummers" who play an insignificant part in the world's drama, or we all are His "larvae" or masks behind which He orders and directs the turmoil and pangs of humanity.²⁸

Martin Luther's Religious Thought

Our study of Luther's doctrine of God has shown us a deity high and lifted up above all His creation. He is at one and the same time both revealed and unrevealed. Of the latter nothing is known to us. Here "we must confess that what is beyond our comprehension is nothing for us to bother about. . . . The path is blocked here."²⁹ God conceals His hidden will in order to deceive that "very cunning spirit, the devil." Although Luther uses the words just quoted in connection with his doctrine of predestination, they apply well to his full concept of the hidden God.

But Luther's unrevealed God is anything but a quietistic, passive deity. He is preeminently a God of action, direction and ordering His great universe in every detail. Nothing escapes Him. No moment in time or eternity, be it small or significant, is beyond His intervention. Nothing can become so topsy-turvy as not to be controlled by Him. He is truly a "great God and a great King of all gods," and Luther is dramatically aware of Him in terms of the highest adoration, reverence, and fear.

"Do you not know that God dwells in light inaccessible?" Luther asks. Then he adds: "We weak and ignorant creatures want to probe and understand the incomprehensible majesty of the unfathomable light of the wonder of God. We approach; we prepare ourselves to approach. What wonder then that His majesty overpowers us and shatters us."³⁰

The hidden God was indeed a reality for Martin Luther, but as the next chapter will show, so was the preached or revealed God.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. WA TR 3, No. 3722.
5. WA 40, I, p. 561.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 562.
8. *Ibid.*.
9. *Luther and Luthertum*, I, p. 743.
10. LW 31, p. 129.
11. EA 60, p. 161. Brackets ours.
12. LW 14, p. 32.
13. WA 2, pp. 13, 20.
14. WA 3, p. 150.
15. H. Bandt: *Luthers Lehre vom verborgenen Gott* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, n.d.), pages 35-40.
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17. LW 14, p. 344.

18. LW 21, pp. 339-345.
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20. LW 21, p. 340.
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22. LW 21, p. 341.
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27. WA 19, p. 360.
28. WA 23, p. 8.
29. T. G. Tappert: *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), page 132.
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Christ



f God remained ever incomprehensible in Luther's thinking, the Second Person of the divine Trinity was very much the opposite. Christ is the supreme revealer of everything that can be thought or known of God. Of course, the moment we begin to discuss Christ as the Son of God, we become involved in a mystery which our reason cannot penetrate. How He can as Son also be coeval with His Father is beyond our capacity to understand. How, as God, He could become man and as man live, labor, serve, suffer, die, live again, and be our God—all to bring fallen, helpless man back to the sonship of God—is beyond human understanding. We can only stand in wonderment and awe before so transcendent a mystery; we can only exclaim with the distraught father of old, "Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief." Mark 9:24. The eternity of Christ and the mystery of His incarnation are as impenetrable to man's understanding as is the hiddenness of God Himself. Christ's becoming man that He might reveal God's inmost being and will is a mystery that can be accepted and believed only by faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Luther's doctrine of Christ as the Second Person in the Godhead need not detain us for long. In 1533 he preached three important sermons in Torgau on the part of the Nicene Creed which states the deity of Christ. To him it was obvious and undebatable that Christ is true God and true man, two natures in one person—in eternity the Son of the Father, and in time the son of Mary. Therefore he was both God and man although in His humanity He was not in substance God but man.¹ In his sermons on the Gospel of John he affirmed: "Thus this article that Christ is both very God and very man is the rock on which our eternal welfare and salvation are built. On this we are baptized; on this we live and die."²

In Luther's thinking on Christ we meet with no speculative Christology. Behind his thinking lay the traditional dogma of the old church. To be a complete Redeemer He must be both God and man, but we cannot understand the mystery that He is fused, or as Luther put it, "baked together as one person, true God and true man."³

If Luther did not indulge in new speculations regarding Christ, he did bring new emphasis on certain points in his Christology. No theologian before or, perhaps, after him stressed the human in Christ as often and emphatically as did Luther. In his lectures on Hebrews (1517) he said that we must first of all learn to know Christ as man because the humanity of Christ is the holy ladder on the rungs of which we rise to know God. We should, therefore, lay aside all speculation concerning God and as our first task seek to understand Christ's humanity. "After all," he said, "when God humbled Himself to make Himself known to us, it is dire rashness on the part of man to seek for himself some other way of salvation."⁴

We meet this thought often in Luther. He was concerned with making Christ as fully human as possible. The deeper we bring Christ into the nature of man, the greater is our joy and comfort.⁵ How were deity and humanity united in Christ? In Luther's view, as we have seen, all creatures are the instruments and means through whom God works His plans and wonders. All creatures contribute something in the process of being God's instruments. Christ was no exception. He was divinity and humanity combined; that is, God was actually present through Christ in our world working His plans and purposes. As God's instrument on earth Christ was under the control of the Holy Spirit. It may be said that the Spirit made Jesus what He was. The Spirit worked in Christ from the beginning of His humanity, but the Spirit did not move Him alike at all times. Rather, Christ, through the Spirit's guidance, grew, developed, and matured as God's instrument so that He could cope with any problem as it arose. "Although the Spirit was in Him from the moment of His conception," Luther affirmed, "still as His body grew and His mind developed naturally as in other human beings, the Spirit embedded Himself in Him more and more and moved Him ever more and more."⁶

In this way Luther sought to uphold the humanity of Christ. There is no deification of the human in Christ, for as man He knew only what the Holy Spirit let Him know. However, Luther insisted that all the while Jesus was here He possessed divinity, but He held it back or secret until His resurrection. "He did not use His divine power," said Luther, but lived and died as "pure man." In His temptations, His daily struggles, His teaching, His suffering and death, His divinity "lay fully hidden and still and did not appear or

shine forth; rather Deity withdrew its power and let humanity alone suffer."⁷ Indeed, God hid Himself and permitted Jesus to experience divine anger. God forsook Christ in His greatest hour of suffering. But from this terrifying experience Jesus emerged as victor, and so became the manifest Son of God through His resurrection. In this manner His human nature, Luther believed, was changed into a divine-human nature, so that He now rules His church in two capacities, namely, true man and true God.

How are we to understand this strong emphasis on Christ as man? Luther held that we can understand Christ in two ways: as gift and as example. He, of course, spoke of Christ as example, but it is Christ as gift that predominates in Luther's writings. As God's gift, Christ comes to us in the gospel of God's grace and love, and this must be basic in man's experience. Luther warned that Christ as example might be a disturbing factor to a soul already burdened by a troubled conscience; and, strange as it may seem, Luther rarely presented Him as an example that we might follow. Only two events in Christ's life were used to emphasize Him in this aspect: the Babe in the manger and Jesus on the cross. He stated specifically that only on the last day will we dare to see Him as our example. Our present will and reason seek to rise "above the clouds" to find Him, and there we meet the great and angry God and so become terrified and doubt that our sins are forgiven.⁸ In a 1517 sermon he said that the majesty and greatness of God drive us to fear, and doubt, and despair. Therefore when God comes to us, He lays aside His divinity and comes as a man, thereby removing all fear. He covers the burning sun with a cloud.

In a 1519 Christmas sermon he exclaimed: "You must not contemplate Christ's divinity, you must not turn your gaze toward His majesty, but turn your soul's thought toward this flesh, this Babe Christ. Divinity can only terrify man. This unfathomable majesty brings man only despair. Therefore did Christ become man and took on all human experiences, except sinning, that you may not fear but accept Him with devotion and love and be cheerful and strong. Especially do I say to the disturbed, anxious, and downcast souls that they look intently on this Babe and believe in faith that He has paid the price for you."⁹

In temptations man must grasp at something. God anticipated this when He let Himself be born among men. He let Himself become concrete man in Jesus. Luther finds this exemplified best in Christ as a helpless Baby in the manger. There is nothing here that frightens man. "What man fears a baby? Does not everybody assist and pity such a little thing rather than become angry? It lets itself be carried about; it gets its food from the mother.

There is no anger here. If I think that God's Son has been such, that He has suckled His mother and still was God, how can I fear Him? How can I cease being happy?"¹⁰

It was, then, Luther's personal experience with sin and temptation that made him emphasize the incarnation and the humanity of Christ. This does not mean that His divinity was neglected or set aside. The two natures do not stand as complements one to the other. In the Man Christ is found also God. The two cannot be separated. The Baby in the crib is "my Creator," said Luther. Mary gave birth not only to a human person but also to God. Whoever despises this Baby or touches Him, despises and touches God. But Luther was eager to show that when God came to us, He came in a manner that we can understand. He did not come as the "naked God," which would terrify man, but in a form that arouses no fear. Thus we can understand and accept Him. This is the manner in which He has revealed Himself in history. But in eternity we will see Him in His majesty.

When Luther presented Christ, then, he presented Him as God revealed. Without Christ as man, true man, there would be no concrete appearance of God. We, too, could not comprehend Christ except as man. "In that He is man," Luther said, "He belongs to us, so that we may accept Him as being our kinsman. That He is now God He can keep for Himself up in heaven; real meat of the matter is that He gave us all and shared Himself with us."¹¹

Luther, then, emphasized more than any other theologian the humanity of Christ, His temptations, sufferings, and even His limitations as human. He was not a superman but had to depend on God for guidance and strength. Still Luther sought constantly to make the divine in Christ attractive. For through Christ divine gifts and power became active in history. God entered history most effectively in Christ, and so Himself lives in history. The past is no longer a series of events or chronicles but "living events that make us live." Christ is the continuously active, moving, divine power in history, and when man experiences Christ's power in forgiveness and justification, he becomes sure and assured of the deity of Christ, that is, the Christ in history. "I have experienced the divinity of Christ so much that I must say: Either God is nothing or Christ is [God]."¹² It is the power of Christ, then, that changes man inwardly and leads to a conviction of the deity of Christ and so to the experience of knowing God. His whole Christology Lurher once put in the following terms: "When the emperor speaks a word, much happens. When Christ speaks, He shakes heaven and earth. Therefore we must consider His word differently from the word of men because He is true God Himself."¹³ Luther held, indeed, that Christ is true God and true man, and

for everyone who believes He becomes "one sole, true God."

As God's gift to man Christ must reveal to man the hidden God. This was His preoccupation, and so fully did He perform the mission that He could say, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father." John 14:9. But the character of His revelation of the Father has been subjected to varying interpretations. In Luther's time the work of Christ was viewed differently according to the intellectual background of the various individuals interested in reform. Erasmus, humanist and scholar, stressed Christ as the revelator of God's will. He emphasized the moral and ethical aspects of Christ's work found in Him as the teacher of mankind, while the redemptive work of Christ, though not neglected, was given less prominence. Many of the Reformers with a humanistic background tended to stress the ethical rather than the redemptive aspect of Christ's work. He was the Great Teacher sent from God to show man the way back to God. Man through his sin has come under a debt so great as to demand eternal death as payment, even eternal damnation. Then Christ appeared as the Mediator between man and God. He paid man's debt through His death; indeed His payment was greater than the totality of man's sin because He was God. Thus He bore the total payment for sin in His bitter sufferings and death, all to reveal divine anger over sin and divine love for the sinner. By paying the penalty for sin, Christ redeemed man from the curse of the law and reconciled him to God, whose holy law man had irreparably broken.

Luther would, of course, deny none of this. In his comments on Romans 4:25 (1515-1516), he said that "Christ's death is the death of sin, and His resurrection is the life of righteousness," because "by His death He has offered satisfaction for our sins, and, by His resurrection, He has affirmed righteousness for us."¹⁴ All the Reformers would agree here.

But in a sermon given in 1519, Luther presented a different emphasis of the problem of Christ's work. He did not at that time differentiate between the significance of Christ's sufferings and death and the meaning of His resurrection, but he made Christ the sinner for man's sake who by His suffering, death, and resurrection conquered sin and thus freed man from it. Through faith man is now declared righteous and free from sin, which can no longer accuse him. But Luther did not mean by this argument an actual or factual freedom from sin such as can be seen visibly; rather it is an act of faith that must not be doubted regardless of how the conscience might still accuse.¹⁵

This view of Christ's work as one great act rather than two acts is seen even more clearly in an Easter sermon from the year 1526.¹⁶ The text was Romans 4:25. Christ took upon Himself humanity's sin which in turn put

Him on the cross and killed Him. But God raised Him from death and made Him ruler over all and victor over sin. Therefore man must look not at himself when his conscience troubles him, but on Christ. When man sees Christ, he has a good conscience and is without sin. Again when Luther said that sin is gone, he meant that sin can no longer disturb the conscience because it can no longer condemn. It is not a factual or physical absence of sin but solely an act of faith, which fills man with joy and gladness. But, Luther asked, how can we find sin in us when Christ's resurrection has taken away sin and conquered death? He answered by drawing a distinction between knowledge and faith. We cannot grasp unless we understand what faith clings to. That Christ was raised for our justification and so took away sin we can neither feel nor fathom with our understanding. Hence we must believe God's promise, receive His Word with our hearing, and cling to Christ's atonement even though we cannot understand it. When we hold on to Christ, our conscience will be at peace and all fear caused by sin will disappear. In his usual blunt language Luther said that we "must enter Christ with skin and hair,"¹⁷ or, as he put it on another occasion, we must become "one cake" with Christ.

And so, while the Reformers with a humanist background generally saw in Christ's death and resurrection two separate acts, Luther after 1519 united both these into one great redemptive fact by which Christ conquered sin, death, and devil, and freed man from God's anger as found in the law. Thus Christ was the great Liberator or Emancipator who by one supreme act freed man from fear of all the powers that would plague, terrorize, and condemn him to eternal perdition.

Christ's work, then, is something that was done apart from man and in the past. It is a finished act. But Luther did not stop there. He connected the past with the present. For every person who unites with Christ by faith must also pass through His death and rise with Him to a new life. Luther asserted repeatedly that every Christian must be conformed to Christ's image and suffering. Christ began the warfare against the devil's power and conquered; the Christian must repeat the process under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In Luther's thinking there was a tremendous intimacy of effort and result between Christ and the sinner saved by grace. The saved sinner reproduces or duplicates by faith, under the direction of the Spirit, the redemptive work of Christ. If we understand Luther rightly, this is a key point in his religious thought, a point to which we shall return in a later chapter.

Martin Luther's Religious Thought

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2. LW 22, p. 25.
3. WA 36, p. 60.
4. WA 57, p. 99. (Comments on Hebrews 1:3.) See LW 29, p. 111.
5. WA 10, I, p. 68.
6. WA 10, I, Pt. I, p. 447.
7. WA 45, p. 240.
8. WA 23, p. 732.
9. WA 9, pp. 440, 441.
10. WA 23, p. 731.
11. WA 34, II, p. 57.
12. WA TR 1, No. 583. Brackets ours.
13. WA 1, No. 684.
14. Romans, p. 152.
15. WA 2, p. 140.
16. WA 10, I, Pt. II, pp. 220-225.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

Holy Spirit

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It is to the merit of Regin Prenter, foremost of Danish Luther scholars, that he has put Luther's thought on the place and work of the Holy Spirit within the entire framework of the Reformer's theology.¹ Strange as it seems, some German students of Luther's doctrine of the Holy Spirit have failed consistently to examine in detail and in breadth the great wealth of material found in his writings on this subject, and some have even asserted that he relegated the Third Person of the Godhead to an unimportant place or function in the divine plan of redemption. This neglect of a careful, we might say sympathetic, analysis of his doctrine of the Holy Spirit has led to a misunderstanding of the Reformer's teaching on a most important point of Christian belief.

Luther accepted without reservations the traditional orthodox view of the Holy Spirit as stated by Augustine and later expounded in medieval scholasticism. In his sermon on the Gospel of John, chapter 1:1-3, he spoke of "the sublime article of our holy Christian faith according to which we believe and confess the one true, almighty, and eternal God." Then he continued: "But he states expressly that three distinct Persons dwell in that same single divine essence, namely, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son from eternity, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, etc. Therefore there are three distinct Persons, equal in glory and majesty; yet there is only one divine essence."²

And farther on in his sermon he buttressed this statement, as it applies to the Holy Spirit, by saying that He "partakes of the same divine majesty and nature with the Father and the Son." This, he added in true Luther form, "must be accepted by faith," since the "Holy Scripture, which is God's Word, says so; and I abide by what it states."³

"The Holy Scripture, which is God's Word, says so." That was Luther's final appeal and authority for his teaching on the subject of the Holy Spirit. Reason, no matter how keen and clever, can "never grasp or comprehend" the doctrine of the Trinity, and no man can believe it "unless his heart has been rouched and opened by the Holy Spirit." "In the end only the Holy Spirit from heaven above can create listeners and pupils who accept this doctrine" that Christ is the Word and God incarnate.⁴

Thus Luther defined in a few moving phrases the character and work of the Holy Spirit. He is true God, and He alone can convey to men the truth that the Son is true God, true Man, and true Scripture. Surely, this is far removed from the conclusions of some scholars who see in Luther's analysis of the character of the Holy Spirit nothing but a "gymnastic mental exercise, or a schoolroom attempt to solve the old sixty-dollar question of three in one," or a "thought-spinning" enterprise.⁵

In his lectures on Genesis, begun in 1535, Luther comes upon the problem of the Holy Spirit in the second verse of the Bible: "And the Spirit of the Lord hovered over the waters." Genesis 1:2. Luther mentions various ways of explaining "the Spirit of the Lord" and immediately says: "But it is more to my liking that we understand Spirit to mean the Holy Spirit. . . . Indeed, it is the great consensus of the church that the mystery of the Trinity is set forth here. The Father creates heaven and earth out of nothing through the Son, whom Moses calls the Word. Over these the Holy Spirit broods. As a hen broods her eggs, keeping them warm in order to hatch her chicks, and, as it were, to bring them to life through heat, so Scripture says that the Holy Spirit brooded, as it were, on the waters to bring to life those substances which were to be quickened and adorned. For it is the office of the Holy Spirit to make alive."⁶

Observe that in identifying "the Spirit of the Lord" as the Holy Spirit Luther accepts the "great consensus of the church," and further, that he at once claims that the office of the Holy Spirit is to make alive, that is to create. The Spirit of the Lord is the Creator-Spirit.⁷ As Luther continues his comments on Genesis chapter 1, he repeatedly speaks of the Holy Spirit as having a creative function. God speaks the creative Word, but the creative Word is spoken as by "God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit."

It is also the Holy Spirir who records the words spoken, and Luther warns that "it is unsafe to go beyond the limit to which the Holy Spirit leads us" in interpreting the record of creation. Commenting on Genesis 1:6, Luther says: "We must pay attention to the expression of Holy Scripture

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and abide by the words of the Holy Spirit, whom it pleased to distribute His creation in this way."⁸

And in his comments on Genesis 1:14 he finds it necessary to repeat the principle which he has already mentioned, "that one must accustom oneself to the Holy Spirit's way of expression." Just as in other sciences one must use technical language, so the Holy Spirit also has His own language and way of expression which is found in Holy Scripture.⁹

Finally, on verse 26 where God speaks, "Let Us make man," Luther observes: "The word 'Let Us make' is aimed at making sure the mystery of our faith, by which we believe that from eternity there is one God and there are three separate Persons in one Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."¹⁰

This clinches, as it were, Luther's argument for the Trinity. When God would crown His whole creation by one great final act, He said, "Let Us make man." Hitherto, God had said, "Let there be," or "Let it bring forth," or "Let the earth bring forth"; but now He says, "Let Us make," indicating "an obvious deliberation and plan." Again it is the Holy Spirit which records the decision and so "dignifies the nature of man in such a glorious manner and distinguishes it from all other creatures."¹¹

Enough has been said, perhaps, about Luther's doctrine of the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity. As such He was true God and had a part in all the acts of creation. He was also the author of the record of creation as found in the Word, that is, He interpreted the Word and set it down for our understanding in Holy Scripture. This is still His work. He still guides us into all truth on the basis of the Word. It is through the Holy Spirit that we understand the mystery of redemption, or "God . . . in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." In this "we are taught by the Word and aided by the Holy Spirit."¹² But whatever the Holy Spirit does, He is always the Creator-Spirit.

The Spirit's sphere of operation, then, is as inclusive as is the sphere of God the Creator and Christ the Redeemer. His chief task is to reveal the hidden God of judgment and anger as the God of abundant mercy and love who gave His Son to be the propitiation for the sins of humanity. It is this restoration of man to God that the Spirit reveals in the Word or Holy Scripture. The Bible is the Spirit's Word in a very real way. He produced it by means of holy men whom He inspired to write the facts of God's dealings, which facts always have but one aim, namely, to gather God's elect in Christ. The Bible, then, is the Holy Spirit's message to the chosen people throughout history; it is not a book for those who are not among the elect.

In a sermon on John 3:8—"So is everyone that is born of the Spirit,"¹³—Luther explained the meaning of the new birth. It is, of course, a miracle, achieved by baptism and the Holy Spirit. Reason must be put aside here, since it cannot fathom and measure something spiritual; "for reason grasps and comprehends only physical matters."¹⁴ The Holy Spirit's share in the miracle of the new birth is first to reprove us of sin and then to comfort us, that is, establish us in faith.

Luther explained it thus: "The Holy Spirit is given to us, and His gifts are bestowed on us in a way that we cannot grasp. No one can determine the time or the place or the person, how and when one is to be converted to God. The Holy Spirit and His gifts are not granted according to human will. . . . Whoever is converted to faith cannot say anything else than that the Holy Spirit comes when He wills and where He wills and to what person He wills, all in His own good season. He comes when and where He chooses, and He confers as many gifts as He pleases."¹⁵

The mystery of the part which the Holy Spirit has in our conversion was not yet exhausted. For Luther held that every person who is converted resembles the Holy Spirit. He and the Holy Spirit begin an intimate fellowship that continues through life; indeed the Holy Spirit is ours even in death, for "we know not where we go" in death.

Luther closed his sermon with this sweeping affirmation: "For a Christian lives and has his existence from his first to his last breath solely in the Holy Spirit, not in reason or in good works but only in the will of God and the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit, not reason, who teaches me to be baptized and to believe. . . . There is no other way, path, or street leading to heaven than that of water and the Holy Spirit."¹⁶

In continuing his sermons on John's Gospel, Luther dealt repeatedly with the office and work of the Holy Spirit. When he expounded chapter 14, verse 26, he treated especially with the place of the Spirit in the work of redemption. The Holy Spirit "dwells with Christendom and sanctifies it," and He does so through the Word and sacrament, which are the "tools and the means through which He continuously sanctifies and purifies Christendom."¹⁷ Thus He makes Christians holy before God. Christians, Luther continued, should find comfort and assurances in the fact that the Spirit does not sit "high above in heaven while we are down here on earth" struggling for holiness by means of our life and works. If we could make ourselves holy by means of our good works, there would be no need of the Holy Spirit at all; but "since we are sinful and unclean in ourselves," He must perform His work in us.¹⁸

Luther did not hesitate to be specific about the Spirit's work. "He baptized me; He proclaimed the gospel of Christ to me; He awakened my heart to believe. Baptism is not of my making; nor is the gospel; nor is faith. He gave these to me. For the fingers that baptized me are not those of a man; they are the fingers of the Holy Spirit. And the preacher's mouth and the words that I heard are not his; they are the words and message of the Holy Spirit. By these outward means He works faith within me and thus He makes me holy."¹⁹

If the Holy Spirit is so constantly present, is the Christian not forever saved and incapable of committing sin? For who can sin with the Holy Spirit in possession of his life? Luther warned immediately that the "Holy Spirit sometimes lets His Christians fall, err, stumble, and sin." But why? Luther never failed to let the saints have something to do after the Holy Spirit has taught them or assured them that they are saints. So He sometimes lets them err and sin, said Luther; and "this is to forestall any complacency, as though we were holy of ourselves, and to teach us to know ourselves and the source of our holiness. Otherwise we would become arrogant and overweening."²⁰

Great and inclusive as is the office of the Holy Spirit, it is not without limits. When Christ said that the Father would send the Holy Spirit "in My name, He shall teach you all things," He actually circumscribed "the office which the Holy Spirit is to administer." But how can He be limited, since He is one of the Godhead? Because, Luther argued, "Christ says that it is to be the Holy Spirit's office to teach Christendom the Word of the Lord Christ and to bring it to mind. And later (15:26) He says: 'He will bear witness to Me,' and 'He will glorify Me' (16:14). He does not say: 'He will confer on the church the power to resolve and order what it pleases about God's Word.' It is not the Holy Spirit's office to alter baptism, the gospel, and the sacrament, or to institute new laws and ordinances. No, it is His office to deal solely with My Word, ordinances, and commandments, to implant these in you and to teach you what I have said."²¹

Clearly Luther had in mind, in putting these words into the mouth of Christ, the actions of popes, cardinals, councils, bishops, doctors, and spiritual fathers who put the "church above the gospel." The Spirit cannot do this, for Christ describes Him "as a Teacher who teaches and proclaims His Word."²² He is not concerned with ordinances dealing with eating, drinking, clothing, fasts, the wearing of special garbs, or the prescribing of ranks among the clergy. Rather "He is interested in other matters, namely, to cleanse us from sin, to deliver us from death, to free us from the devil, to extinguish the fire

of hell, and to make us holy, living, and eternal children of God."²³

Luther did more than battle against his old church in its uses and interpretations of the office of the Holy Spirit; his harshest judgment was reserved for "the Anabaptists and their ilk," which included, among others, the great Swiss reformer Zwingli. While his conflict with these Reformers will be taken up in fuller detail in a later chapter, it may be said now that Luther used John 14:26 to combat their claims to possess the Holy Spirit. "Our whole quarrel with all these factions," said Luther, "revolves about their claim that they have the Holy Spirit and that therefore they should be believed."²⁴ It was his misfortune, Luther insisted, to be constantly locked in battle with the devil and false spirits. "But if we view this verse [John 14:26] and others aright, we can judge properly and refute everything that opposes it. Let them advance whatever doctrine they will: I know well what my Lord Christ says and what I must believe. If someone comes with a doctrine allegedly taught and revealed by the Holy Spirit, I cling to this Word and apply it to his doctrine as the proper touchstone. If I see that it agrees with the words of Christ, I consider it true and good. . . . Thus we can protect and defend ourselves against all error and fanatical spirits if we but adhere to this and preserve this verse in its truth and purity, knowing that the Holy Spirit does not present the trifles and hocus-pocus of men, but great and serious matters, namely, Christ with His gifts. We can boldly rely on this; and we can also conclude that we who have Christ are holy before God and have the Holy Spirit with us in opposition to any self-styled holiness."²⁵

That Luther held to the principles of interpretation of the Holy Spirit's office and work as he stated them in these and in other sermons and writings is most certain. His hardest strictures were given as he defended his doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and at times his dialectic became harsh and pitiless.

Before we leave this brief discussion of Luther's doctrine of the Holy Spirit, we must refer briefly to one office of the Third Person of the Godhead which was not controversial and which the Reformer loved to expound often in his writings. His scripture was Romans 8:26, 27: "Likewise the Spirit also helps our infirmity: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit asks for us with unspeakable groanings. And He that searches the hearts knows what the Spirit desires, because He asks for the saints according to God."

Luther found the deepest consolation in these verses, and he never tired of commenting upon them. The verses seem to have been intimately connected with his own travail of soul and anguish, as well as his spiritual victories. In his lectures on Romans (1515-1516) he opened to view these

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times of trouble and victory when the Holy Spirit comes to our help. God hears our prayers, said Luther, "and is about to fulfill them," but He works in a way that "contravenes all our conceptions." For He seems to be offended by our prayers and instead of giving us what we pray for His nature is "first to destroy and bring to nothing whatever is in us before He gives us of His own." Only by making everything about us seem hopeless and distraught can He bring us into a state of complete surrender where we stop making plans, "become purely passive in relation to God," and "let our hands rest."²⁶

Then it is that the Holy Spirit comes to our rescue with "groanings that cannot be uttered" to help our infirmities. Without His help "we could not possibly bear up under God when He acts in this way to hear and fulfill our prayers."²⁷ When all seems to go against us, the Holy Spirit comes over us and does what we ask for. This, Luther concluded, is the profound meaning of the words, "He helps our infirmities."²⁸

However, the Spirit not only rescues us in our deepest hours of despair, but He also determines the content and character of our prayers: "For we are too weak and impotent to pray for something big," so the Spirit asks God for a larger request in place of our insignificant one, and God changes forthwith ours into the Spirit's prayer.

And so Romans 8:26, 27 is fulfilled in any and all circumstances, but always in opposites. We pray for succor and salvation, and God "places us under greater damnation in order to save us." In this case "He hides His way of granting our prayers." Or, we pray for insignificant things and are literally frightened and begin to run away when God gives us the large things which the Holy Spirit has asked God to give us in place of our limited prayers. In either case we are the recipients of the benefits that "the good God offers to us" because the Holy Spirit "prays for us and helps us in our infirmity."²⁹ It is then that we experience the profound fact that in the presence of the Holy Spirit as our Helper we are in truth being aided by God Himself who brings us His grace and salvation.

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3. LW 22, p. 6.
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5. See Rudolf Otto, *Die Anschauung vom heiligen Geiste bei Luther* (Göttingen, 1898), page 9; J. von Walter, *Die Theologie Luthers* (Gütersloh, 1940), page 133.
6. LW 1, p. 9.
7. See R. Prenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-209, for a full treatment of Luther's view.

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8. LW 1, p. 30.
9. LW 1, p. 47.
10. LW 1, p. 57.
11. LW 1, pp. 56, 57.
12. LW 1, p. 64.
13. Given May 4, 1538.
14. LW 22, p. 300.
15. LW 22, p. 302.
16. LW 22, pp. 302, 303.
17. LW 22, p. 169.
18. LW 24, p. 168.
19. LW 24, p. 170.
20. LW 24, p. 172.
21. LW 24, p. 173.
22. LW 24, p. 174.
23. LW 24, p. 175.
24. LW 24, pp. 176, 177.
25. LW 24, p. 177.
26. Romans, pp. 240, 241; R. Prenter, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
27. Romans, p. 241.
28. Romans, p. 243.
29. Romans, pp. 244, 246.

The Church

“

e now builds him, as it were, a temple that he [Adam] may worship Him and thank the God who has so kindly bestowed all these things on him.”¹

Luther here describes the first church in history, planned by God and located in the Garden of Eden. It is, Luther says, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “Adam’s church, altar, and pulpit.” God gave it to Adam so he could yield “to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the word of God and will of God, and give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation.”²

Notice that in these words Luther gives a complete church program, such as might be found in any well-ordered church today. The church was established before the civil government. The Lord did the preaching. Had Adam “remained in innocence, this preaching would have been like a Bible for him and for all of us; and we would have had no need for paper, ink, pens, and that endless multitude of books which we require today.”³ Further, the church was established by the express word of God and was given a distinct form of worship. It was the first institution set up, even before the household, claims Luther, not to mention civil government.⁴

Alas, the original church came to an abrupt change with Adam’s transgression. But God did not end the church He had established. He now made Adam the earthly head of the church, and to the church He gave such visible signs of grace to show His presence as circumcision, sacrifices, and the rainbow. “The church,” says Luther, “has never been deprived to such an extent of outward signs that it became impossible to know where God could surely be found.”⁵

This is an important point in Luther’s doctrine of the church: The church

is where God's visible signs of grace are. To us, in the New Testament, "Baptism and the eucharist have been given as visible signs of grace, but what baptism and the Lord's Supper are for us, sacrifice and offering was for Adam after the promise. God revealed His grace in the sacrifices and gave His approval of them by kindling and consuming them with fire."⁶

Into this post-Edenic church establishment came the first terrible tragedy of history. Cain murdered his brother Abel. As high priest Adam must act, Luther says. He put his murderer son out of the church. But Cain could not take it calmly that he was excommunicated and thus deprived of rule and priesthood. He vented his wrath and fury by starting a bloodthirsty, hypocritical, and devilish church, which has been continued by his descendants ever since. Gone forever was Adam's "church of the open sky or hill or clump of trees"; now the church must meet in a "specific place to preach, pray, and sacrifice." It was a small church, Luther supposes, identified by the terms "sons of God" (Genesis 6:2), in which Adam, as high priest, "rules everything by the Word and sound doctrine."⁷ But with time the "sons of God" married Cainite women and so produced the ungodly race before the Flood arrived. The Cainites tried thus to destroy the godly by "every sort of evil trick." It was the church of Satan which "is everlastingly at war with the church of God."

With the Flood, Luther continues, the second age of the history of the church opened. Noah was the supreme pontiff, or, as Peter calls him, a "herald of righteousness." 2 Peter 2:5. A new world and a new church appeared. This church was the "seedbed, as it were, of that world which is to endure until the end of the world."⁸ To be sure, the post-Flood church had existed scarcely a hundred years when Nimrod appeared, an evil man, who "attacked the godly generation, drove it from its abodes, and established a new church and new forms of worship."⁹ Great damage was done the church, and ungodliness so increased that even the descendants of the saints were carried away in error. But even during these decadent centuries the patriarchs, Noah and his son Shem, stood as bulwarks for God's true church, just as the second son, Ham, first disgraced his father Noah, then let his son Nimrod pursue his evil career and work until the true church was in great peril.

From this threatening doom it was rescued by Abraham's obedience to the call of God. With Abraham, Luther says, the third age of the church began. Moses points out how at the time of great peril "God accomplished the rebirth of the church, lest it collapse entirely and true religion be utterly out."¹⁰ Luther likens the story of the early church to a brook that had flowed peace-

fully, but from now on would have accessions and rush and roar like a great river until the holy nation of Israel should expand into the vast ocean that fills the world with its name.¹¹

In Luther's mind Abraham stands preeminent among the ancient saints because he was able "to apprehend with his heart" the "impossible, unbelievable, and incomprehensible things, as though they were real and already present."¹² He built altars wherever he went, he was bishop and priest, and he taught others about the true worship of God. Says Luther: "This must be the one purpose both of altars and of temples, that those who gather there hear the Word of God, praise God, and carry out those forms of worship which He has commanded. Where these activities are not present, there altars and temples are nothing but workshops of idolatry . . . , for the true forms of worship are disregarded, and meanwhile the entire worship is devoted to the blasphemous and ungodly sacrifice of the mass."¹³

Observe how Luther moves from the practice and work of Abraham long ago to the practices of his own day as comprehended in the mass. As carried out in Luther's time, the sacrifice of the mass was ungodly. The reason why the church had reached such a pass was that she had given up the Word to rely on numbers, power, and prestige, which do not of themselves constitute the church of God.

"The church is the daughter who is born from the Word," Luther insists; "she is not the mother of the Word. He who gives up the Word and hastens to put his reliance on persons ceases to be the church and becomes completely blinded. Neither a large number nor power gives him any support, just as by contrast those who keep the Word, like Noah and his people, are the church, even though they are few in number, even only eight souls."

At this point, Luther shifts to his own situation: "Today the papists are more numerous than we are and their prestige is greater than ours. We are not only reviled, but we also suffer in various ways. This must be borne until the judgment comes by which God will reveal that we are His church, but that the papists are the church of Satan."¹⁴

According to Luther, the first and absolutely indispensable characteristic of the church is, then, that it must have, keep, and believe the Word of Christ; that is, the promise of God. All else is vanity. The Turks are adorned with power and wisdom, but they are not the church. Socrates, Plato, and Cicero were great and wise men, but they were not the church. Likewise, the pope and the cardinals are very wise men, but they are not the church on that account, "for they do not have this essential difference by which the church is set apart from the world, namely, the promise" as found in God's Word.

"Consequently, we concede to the pope and his followers their wisdom and prestige. And I add even the succession and office. But they are not the church on this account. For there is lacking that essential difference, which is faith in the gospel. But those who do not believe the gospel are not the church; nor do they belong to the kingdom of Christ."¹⁵

The church, then, must have the Word of God and must believe it, Luther insists, that is, the promises of God as given to the saints of old and found in the Word. There is another fact about the church which he emphasizes, namely, the fact of persecution. Actually, he constantly has in mind that just as the sons of Abraham were of two kinds, so the church is of two kinds. The one is killed and suffers persecution, "the other kills and persecutes the brethren, just as Cain and Ishmael did."

"But each of the two has its own sure fruits," Luther continues. "The false church blasphemes and persecutes the Word; but the true church retains the confession and patiently bears persecutions, just as today we stand before the emperor and the entire world and confess the Word.

"On the other hand, the papists deny the Word of Christ and try to suppress it by means of their ungodly decrees. . . . Therefore, we cannot doubt that the church of the pope is the church of Satan, even though godly people can make proper use of their ministry when they retain the essentials.¹⁶

And, in another assertion, Luther again brings up the argument that the evangelical church retains confession of the gospel, accepts the promises of God, and keeps the Word of Christ, and many have been and are being killed on behalf of the Word. This he considers certain proof of its being the true church, while "the pope and his followers are the church of Satan." Further, the pope is "antichrist and the loathsome beast (Revelation 13:1) which has blasphemous names on its forehead."¹⁷ This is one of his bitterest dismissals of the church out of which he had come.

Another mark of the true church is its universality. It is not confined to one particular nook and does not center in any one family. It is, therefore, called the catholic church and consists "only of those who are baptized. For apart from baptism, there is no salvation, just as in the church of the Old Testament there was no salvation apart from circumcision which embodied faith in the promise of God."¹⁸

Still another mark of God's church, says Luther, is found in John 14:23: "If a man love Me, he will keep My words, and My Father will love him, and We will come unto him, and make Our abode with him." Luther continues: "His commandments must be there, and it is necessary to love them. For

God does not make His abode unless we have His commandments. If the church is to be the house of God, it is necessary for it to have the Word of God and for God alone to be the Head of the household in this house."¹⁹

The Roman Church countered with arguments of its own. They cried out, says Luther: "You have the keys from us, the sacrament of the altar, the calling, and the ministry, which are marks of the true church. But one thing is lacking, namely, that you refuse to acknowledge that the pope and the cardinals are the church."²⁰

Luther acknowledges that the Roman Church had many earmarks of the true church—they had "baptism, absolution, and the text of the gospel, and there are many godly people among them"; but he refuses to concede that "the pope and their pomp is the true church." To honor and accept the pope would be to deny Christ, who "does not allow Satan to reign in His house." The "papistic traditions are godless and in conflict with the Word of God."²¹

Beneath Luther's strong denunciation of the papists and their claims to be the true church there lurks a basic question. Did Luther really ever reject the Catholic or Roman Church in its totality as the true church?

This is not an easy question to answer. Luther, in his career as Reformer, made hundreds of statements on the subject of the true church in history and in his own day. These statements leave no doubts about Luther's certainty that his cause was on the side of righteousness and that he and his followers were members of the true church. But behind these facts there are pertinent considerations that still make it seem essential to raise the question.

In an attempt to clarify the background of Luther's view on the church, one fact must never be forgotten or allowed to dim: He was excommunicated by the church authorities and outlawed by an imperial edict. Thus he was, for all practical purposes, excluded from the society of his day. This surely was not his desire. The church which he wanted to reform thrust him out. Were he to continue upon the road of reform, he must set up new forms of church order and life centering in the new gospel which he had discovered. His problem was to decide how much of the old church forms could and should be retained.

Luther ended by retaining a great deal. Nowhere is his inborn conservatism, as well as his genius, shown better than in the liturgy and the church forms which he developed during the decade after his return from the Wartburg in 1522. The church that emerged under his leadership by 1530 was new, but it was also very much the old church; we might even call it the Roman Church renewed, reformed, and modernized. The new church was the daughter of the old.

What Luther thought of the old church which had disgraced him is perhaps best stated in a long letter he wrote in 1528 to two Catholic priests who had asked him for his opinion on the Anabaptists and aid against them. The uncompromising stand of the Anabaptists and the Sacramentarians on points of doctrine Luther called an effort "to spite the pope and to be free of any taint of antichrist" and "nonsense."

"We on our part," Luther wrote, "confess that there is much that is Christian and good under the papacy; indeed, everything that is Christian and good is to be found there and has come to us from this source. For instance, we confess that in the papal church there are the true Holy Scriptures, true baptism, the true sacrament of the altar, the true keys to the forgiveness of sins, the true office of the ministry, the true catechism in the form of the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the articles of the creed. . . . I contend that in the papacy there is true Christianity, even the right kind of Christianity and many great and devoted saints."²²

"The Christendom that now is under the papacy," he continued, "is truly the body of Christ and a member of it. If it is His body, then it has the true spirit, gospel, faith, baptism, sacrament, keys, the office of the ministry, prayer, Holy Scriptures, and everything that pertains to Christendom. So we are all still under the papacy and therefrom have received our Christian treasures."²³

So large-scale an endorsement of his old church seems to leave but little that Luther could call new in his own. But here the Reformer would disagree sharply. Even while he was telling how much good the Roman Church holds for all, he attacked its leadership in strong terms. The pope is the evil thing, the antichrist, said Luther. "When we oppose and reject the pope it is because he does not keep these treasures of Christendom which he has inherited from the apostles. Instead, he makes additions of the devil and does not use these treasures for the improvement of the temple. Rather, he works toward its destruction, in setting his commandments and ordinances above the ordinances of Christ."²⁴

Luther closed his attack in these strong words: "The antichrist sits in the temple of God through the action of the devil, while the temple still is and remains the temple of God through the power of Christ."²⁵

Luther's last and most bitter attack on the pope is found in his *Against the Roman Papacy, an Institution of the Devil*, written in 1545 to serve as a guideline for Protestant diplomacy while the church council which Pope Paul III had convened would meet at Trent early in 1545.²⁶

Luther had already anticipated what such a council, if it ever met, would

do to his church. He denied that his adversaries could ever take away from the evangelicals the title "church," but they "will condemn and suppress us." Then he opined: "But the verdict will be different when the Son of man comes in His glory. Then it will be revealed that the holy martyrs of God, John Huss and Jerome of Prague, were true and holy members of the holy church, but that the pope, the bishops, the doctors, the monks, and the priests all were the church of the malevolent in the pestilential chair, the slaves of Satan who helped their father lie and murder."²⁷

Observe that Luther's sweeping denunciation of the Roman Church in this passage includes virtually the entire hierarchical organization of the church but does not take in the rank and file of its members. On other occasions he spoke of the "pope and his followers," who arrogate to themselves the name "church" but actually are enemies of the promise made to Abraham.²⁸ One might feel that so inclusive an expression involves the totality of Catholicism, but this is not so. The real enemy of God is ever the pope and the hierarchy that followed him.

This was the burden of his significant treatise *Against the Roman Papacy*. This terrifying and, at times, scurrilous document was directed against the claims of the popes of Luther's day, or more accurately, the papacy since the time of Gregory (590-604). So Luther warned that we must not understand the term "Roman Church" as meaning the "true Roman Church" that existed "before the papacy," or before Gregory. The false papacy began in 607 with Boniface III, Luther maintained, and it had never ceased since to claim both temporal and spiritual supremacy as head of the true church. Luther rejected the claim categorically. He posed and answered this question: "Where does the papacy come from? I repeat: it comes from the devil because it does not come from the church, which Christ rules through His Holy Spirit, and it does not come from the temporal authority. I will prove this so thoroughly that even the gates of hell will not prevail against it."²⁹

We will not follow Luther's development of his argument against papal claims. But we know that he eventually reduced the papal office to a mere "figment of human imagination and invention," obtained by papal "arrogance, arbitrariness, and malice," while the pope "decorated himself with God's Word" and so blasphemed God and made "an idol of himself."³⁰ Meanwhile, Luther left the laity in the church quire alone, and he could even say that "Christ certainly has several Lots and his daughters (Genesis 19:15) in the Roman Sodom, who are displeased by the horrible nature of the papacy."³¹

While Luther showed great forbearance and tolerance toward the rank

and file in the Roman Church, it is important to observe his attitude toward the segments of dissent that came largely out of his own movement but went far beyond it in matters of doctrine and church organization. The Reformer, who was so generous with the church and the society that outlawed him, had scant regard and respect for any and all that challenged or went beyond him. He dismissed completely their claims to have truth or to be a church.

In his lectures on the book of Genesis, Luther, as we have seen, discussed often the subject of the true church and the false. He related that in all ages the ungodly have assumed the name and title of the church and have adorned themselves with it. "Although there is nothing to which they are less entitled, the papists, the Anabaptists, the Sacramentarians, and the instigators of rebellion—Münzer and others—want to be the church and lay claim to this title even if it means bloodshed. But the saints, who are the true church, sigh and are saddened when they see how the ungodly so smugly appropriate to themselves the blessings and promises."³²

As he continued to elaborate upon the claims of the ungodly to be the true church, he added the Turks to the list of "kingdoms of the world," who have claimed to be the true church, and then he reverted to the claims of the heretics: "Thus the heretics, who are the originators of offenses and who subvert sound doctrine, 'live as the enemies of the cross of Christ,' as Paul states with tears (Philippians 3:18, 19), whose 'god is the belly'; convinced that they are the church they boast endlessly over against the true church."³³

The trouble with the Sacramentarians, Anabaptists, enthusiasts, and any other form of heretics, according to Luther, was that they had neither the Word of Scripture nor the sacraments of the true church. Their claims to be the true church foundered on this all-important fact and made them blasphemers, agents of Satan, and bearers of sedition and treason. They were, Luther said, the tools of Satan to produce division and doubt. "For Satan needs to do no more through the enthusiasts than always to produce doubt. He thinks it is enough where he can speak haughtily and contemptuously about us, as the rebel Sacramentarians do. None of them take pains to make clear and to prove their arrogance, but their concern is to make our interpretation contemptible and uncertain. They teach doubt, not faith, calling this Scripture and the Word of God."³⁴

This was Luther's final charge against all forms of dissent. In the lectures on the Psalms, as early as 1513, he spoke of "holy heretics," that is, persons who lived better lives than those in the church but refused to serve it, and called them self-centered and arrogant. Now as Reformer he applied the same charge to dissenters and added for good measure the terms "evil rogues

and the godless." Still he could not altogether exclude heretics from Christian society. "Still we must admit that the enthusiasts have the Scriptures and the Word of God in other doctrines. Whoever hears it from them and believes will be saved, even though they are unholy heretics and blasphemers of Christ."³⁵

Alas, this "minor grace" could not save the "holy heretics" from persecution and martyrdom, though Luther never relished the policy of killing them.

Luther was undoubtedly a traditional churchman, and the church which he built was established along traditional lines as modified and reinterpreted by him. In the end, and somewhat against his ideal, he let it take in the entire community or state or country, and he brooked no serious challenges. It is a fact that the evangelical church, which emerged from the efforts of the secular German authorities to organize Luther's movement, did not meet his ideas of the true church in all respects. Actually it was a makeshift. The true church must consist of God's elect. This concept is met throughout his writings whenever the church of his ideal is described. Notice, for example, this statement: "I believe that there is on earth, through the whole wide world, no more than one holy, common Christian church, which is nothing else than a congregation, or assembly of the saints, that is, the pious, believing men on earth, which is gathered, preserved, and ruled by the Holy Ghost, and daily increased by means of the sacrament and the Word of God."³⁶

Luther did not create the doctrine of the communion of the saints, but probably no theologian has stated it more movingly or in more lofty, idyllic prose than did he. Witness the following: "This is the communion of saints in which we glory. And whose heart will not be lifted up, even in the midst of great evils, when he believes that which is indeed the very truth: namely, that the blessings of all the saints are his blessings, and that his evil is also theirs! For this is the sweet and pleasant picture which the apostle Paul depicts in Galatians 6, 'Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.' Is it not a blessing to be in such a company in which 'Whether one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it'? Therefore, when I suffer, I suffer not alone, but Christ and all Christians suffer with me. Even so, others bear my burden, and their strength becomes my own. The church's faith supports my fearlessness, the chastity of others bears the temptations of my flesh, the fastings of others are my gains, the prayer of another pleads for me. . . . Who, then, could despair of his sins? Who would not rejoice in his pains? For it is not he that bears his sins and pains; or if he does bear them, he bears them not alone, but is assisted by so many holy sons of God, yea, even by Christ Himself.

So great a thing is the communion of saints, and the church of Christ."³⁷

This is the ideal church of Luther's thought and so very unlike the actual state organization that came into being wherever his cause triumphed. In truth, the dissenters, whom the Reformer denounced as blasphemers and children of Satan, came much nearer to meeting his lofty ideal of the communion of saints than did his own followers. The Anabaptists could accept heartily his definition of the church as "the place of the people where God dwells for the purpose of bringing us into the kingdom of heaven, for it is the gate of heaven," and they sought valiantly to be that people. Luther, of course, would hear none of it.

Nevertheless, he sensed the need of a church that should embody the ideal he described as the communion of the saints. In his great work *The German Mass*, which he finished toward the end of 1525, he described three kinds of divine service or mass.³⁸

The first was the traditional Latin service, which he was loath to discontinue.

The second, the new German mass, which he had just completed and introduced, "should be arranged," he said, "for the sake of the unlearned lay folk."

The third kind of service "should be a truly evangelical order." It should not be a public service at all but be limited to such as want "to be Christians in earnest" and carry "the gospel with hand and mouth." Such would sign their names as members and meet in a house "to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works." They would discipline undesirable members. The service would be marked by simplicity of church order and emphasis "on the Word, prayer, and love."³⁹

This was clearly Luther's idea of divine service. Why did he not write a manual for it? We have his reasons. He writes: "In short, if one had the kind of peoples and persons who wanted to be Christians in earnest, the rules and regulations would soon be ready. But as yet I neither can nor desire to begin such a congregation or assembly or to make rules for it. For I have not yet the people or persons for it nor do I see many who want it."

He goes on to say that if he were requested to help create such a service, he would surely give his aid, but he hopes that meanwhile earnest Christians will join together and find each other. Then he adds a most important factor. "For if I should try to make it out of my own need, it might turn into a sect. For we Germans are a rough, rude, and reckless people, with whom it is hard to do anything, except in cases of dire need."⁴⁰

And so Luther ended his search for the best church service on a note of

fear. "It might turn into a sect," he complained, seeing no demand for a "truly evangelical order." The Münzer debacle in the Peasants' Revolt, perhaps still fresh in his mind; Karlstadt's views on the church service, which he knew well; and the beginnings of Anabaptism in Switzerland, which had no doubt reached him; all filled him with fear. In sermons on 1 Peter, given in 1522, he spoke of the Christian as part of God's temple, a house not made of wood or stone but a Christian congregation where all are equal, one like another, and "all placed and filled on one another and joined together through love without malice, guile, hypocrisy, hatred, and slander."⁴¹

This was Luther's idea of the true congregation. "No one can be saved," Luther stated with finality, "who is not found in this congregation, holding with it one faith, Word, sacraments, hope and love, and that no Jew, heretic, heathen, or sinner can be saved unless he become united with it and conformed to it in all things."⁴²

Unfortunately, the Reformer never found it necessary to compose a church service or mass for this idealized assembly of saints.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. LW 1, pp. 94, 95.
2. *Ibid.*
3. LW 1, p. 105.
4. LW 1, p. 115.
5. LW 1, p. 248.
6. LW 1, p. 250.
7. LW 1, p. 327.
8. LW 2, p. 57.
9. LW 2, p. 230.
10. LW 2, p. 245.
11. *Ibid.*
12. LW 2, p. 254.
13. LW 2, p. 284.
14. LW 2, p. 101.
15. LW 4, p. 54.
16. LW 4, p. 33.
17. LW 4, pp. 31, 32.
18. LW 3, p. 106.
19. LW 5, p. 245.
20. *Ibid.*
21. LW 5, p. 246.
22. LW 40, pp. 231, 232.
23. LW 40, p. 232.
24. LW 40, pp. 232, 233.
25. LW 40, p. 233.
26. LW 41, pp. 263-376.
27. LW 2, p. 21.
28. LW 4, p. 31.

29. LW 41, p. 301.
30. LW 41, p. 303.
31. LW 41, p. 296.
32. LW 3, p. 13.
33. LW 3, p. 14.
34. LW 40, p. 262.
35. LW 40, p. 251.
36. WML 2, p. 373.
37. WML 1, pp. 165, 166.
38. LW 53, pp. 61-90.
39. LW 53, pp. 63, 64.
40. LW 53, p. 64.
41. LW 30, p. 52.
42. WML 2, p. 373.

The Word

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n expounding Romans 8:19 (1516)

Luther discussed the difference of approach to "things of the world" between the philosophers and metaphysicians on one hand and himself on the other. The former, he charged, were deeply engaged in the present state of things and so were caught up in foolish opinions that "befog us in metaphysics." He himself would have none of such studies—he considered them useless and a waste of precious time.

Here is Luther's outline of his own mission as a teacher of theology: "Indeed, I believe that I owe this duty to the Lord of crying out against philosophy and turning men to Holy Scripture. For, perhaps, if someone else who had not been through it all were to do it, he would either be scared to do it or he would not be believed."

"But I have been in the grind of these studies for, lo, these many years and am worn out by it, and on the basis of long experience, I have come to be persuaded that it [philosophy] is a vain study doomed to perdition.

"For this reason, I admonish you all as earnestly as I can: Be quickly done with these studies and let it be your only concern not to establish and to defend them, but rather, to deal with them as with bad skills that we learn only in order to get rid of them or as errors that we take up in order to refute them. . . . It is high time that we transferred from other studies and learn 'Jesus Christ and Him crucified.' 1 Corinthians 2:2."¹

Thus Luther stated the theme of his teaching, preaching, and writing. He never deviated from it, regardless of time and place. His letters, at times so very personal, reflected his preoccupation with "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," his *Table Talk* dealt chiefly with this subject, his lectures in the classroom continuously presented the theme of Christ, and his more than 2,300

sermons were a never-ending hymn of praise for God's gift of Christ to man. Even his most bitter struggles with his adversaries, when his billingsgate became distressingly low and unseemly, were nonetheless a defense of the theme of Christ's mission and office.

The source of Luther's manifold labors and utterances was always the Word. In the Reformer's use of this term it became surprisingly meaningful and varied. It could mean God, Christ the Son, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures or the Bible, the Christian Church, holy men, the spoken or preached Word, the sacraments—anything that God uses to reveal Himself through Christ to the elect.

Not that Luther for one moment accepted the claims of the many dissidents of his time to have or to understand the Word. He rejected them all—colleagues like Karlstadt, and Agricola, disciples like Münzer and Zwilling, or a Reformer like Zwingli, all of whom did not follow the Word on some or all basic doctrines according to Luther.

The Word, then, begins with God. From all eternity God has "a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation with Himself in His divine heart, unknown to angels and men."² This is called His Word. He was with God, and through Him God resolved to create heaven and earth. But this resolve was unknown to man until the Word became flesh and announced it to us. Luther warned that no man should mistakenly assume that when John the Evangelist terms the "Son of God a Word" he does it "in any simple or trivial sense,"³ because without this "Word or Speech" nothing was made. It existed "from the beginning of the creation of the world" and was, indeed, "in the Father's heart from all eternity."⁴

Clearly, Luther was dealing with origins in these comments on John 1:1-3. He was aware of this and added quickly that though the Word created all things, the Word itself was "not created or made" but was already in existence, that is, "preceded all creatures."⁵

At this point in Luther's comment the Holy Spirit enters the picture: "Now the Holy Spirit testifies through St. John: 'In the beginning was the Word'; furthermore: 'All things were made through Him.' Therefore the Word cannot possibly be numbered among the creatures but has His eternal being in the Godhead. The incontrovertible and irrefutable deduction is that this Word is God. And this is also St. John's conclusion."⁶

Here we have come upon Luther's chain of command in his argument for the Word of God; it was God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and John the Evangelist. However, Luther's source of information is Holy Scripture as written by John. The Reformer now concludes his line of command in the words: "If

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this conclusion is founded on Holy Scripture, which is the Word of God and abides forever (1 Peter 1:25) . . . then we Christians can come to no other opinion or conclusion than that the Word was not created but existed from all eternity. This conclusion does not rest on reason."⁷

Luther is affirming throughout these comments the deity and eternity of Christ, but in so doing he also states unequivocably his doctrine of the Word. Christ is the Word. This is attested to by the Holy Spirit who speaks through human instruments and records the words in Holy Scripture, which is the Word of God and abides forever. Christians accept the Word of God by faith. This is the chain of God's revelation and the central theme of Luther's doctrine of the Word. Christ is the Word as attested to by the Holy Spirit in Holy Scripture.

What is Holy Scripture?

In a study entitled *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers*, by R. E. Davies,⁸ the author concludes that "Luther set up the totalitarian omnicompetent Word of God in place of the totalitarian, omnicompetent church of the Middle Ages." Having said this, he goes on to limit sharply Luther's concept of the Word of God. "For what is this Word of God? We have seen that it is a selection made by Luther from the Bible, and that the principle of selection is: Does this or that writing preach Christ or not? If it does, it is evangelic and apostolic and part of the Word of God; if not, it is none of these things."⁹

Following his reasoning, Davies would in the end have Luther's Word of God to consist of certain books of the Old Testament, and of the New Testament the Gospels, the Pauline letters, 1 John, 1 Peter, and the Acts.

Could he but know this, the Reformer would undoubtedly be surprised and angered, to be made the arbiter by a modern scholar of what is or is not inspired in Holy Scripture. Surely, Luther never made any such claim. To him the Bible contains all the authority on all matters of faith. It stands on a plane all its own, higher than all human power, higher, immeasureably higher, than the church itself. His understanding of the Bible was distinct. It is the Word of God, that is, God who is Lord of all. No writer of any part of the Bible was also Lord over what he wrote. "Not one letter in Scripture is purposeless—for Scripture is God's writing and God's Word."¹⁰ He could say early in his career (1513-15) and in a lecture on the Psalms: "All the words of God are weighed, counted, and measured,"¹¹ and in his later career (1540) in another lecture on the Psalms: "Not only the words but also the phrasing which the Holy Spirit and Scripture use are divine."¹²

The reason for such a rigorous interpretation of the content of the Bible

is not hard to find. Luther held that "the Holy Spirit Himself and God, the Creator of all things," authored the Book. It is the Holy Spirit's Book, "written by men, but not of men, nor from men but from God." Now the "Holy Spirit is not a fool or a drunkard to express one point, not to say one word, in vain."¹³

"If only we believed that God is speaking to us," Luther wrote, "and that whatever we read or hear in the Bible is God's Word, we would find and feel that it is not read or heard futilely or in vain. But our confounded unbelief and miserable flesh keep us from seeing and noting that God is speaking with us in Scripture or that Scripture is God's Word. Rather we think it is the word of Isaiah, Paul, or some other mere man, who has not created heaven and earth. Therefore it is not God's Word to us and does not bear its fruit until we recognize it as God's Word within ourselves."¹⁴

These statements, among many, suffice to show that Luther felt that the Bible is entirely God's Word—no matter how strange the incidents, as the story of Leah and Rachel in Genesis 30:14-16, or ungrammatical the statements, as occurs, for example, in Paul, Galatians 2:6. Luther ended all by saying: "This book, the Holy Scripture, is the Holy Spirit's book."¹⁵

Luther not only asserted the complete lordship of God in and over the Bible, but he also gave us the solution to the whole problem of our grasping and understanding the Book as God's Book. We must first hear and believe the Bible as God's Book; then we will feel and find the lordship of God on its pages. Once we submit to God's authority, we will "recognize it as God's Word within ourselves." Without submission to His lordship, insists Luther, there can be no understanding of the Word, but when our "confounded unbelief and miserable flesh" yield to God's authority there comes to us immediately the certainty of its inspirations. "And so," Luther concluded, "no book, teaching, or word is able to comfort in troubles, fear, misery, death, yea, in the midst of devils and in hell, except this Book, which teaches us God's Word and in which God Himself speaks with us as a man speaks with his friend."¹⁶

This was Luther's ultimate in all his teaching: God speaks to man as a man speaks with his friend. But when God speaks, His words are inspired, "And so we credit all of Holy Scripture to the Holy Spirit."¹⁷ Luther's doctrine of God's dealings with man demand an inspired Bible, a Bible inspired in its entirety. Luther looked upon Holy Scripture as a grand unity, in which every part must be read and understood in its relation to Christ who is the Lord of the Scriptures. Said he: "The Holy Scriptures are a mighty forest, but there is not one tree in it that I have not shaken with my own hand."¹⁸

That he could powerfully shake every tree in this awesome forest is seen in the various prefaces which he penned to the individual books of his own translation, which he completed in 1534.

In these prefaces Luther wrote as he "felt" about the books of Holy Writ. As always, he had strong, sometimes impetuous, feelings, and so we come upon single statements that at a casual reading sound almost alarming and as impinging on his theory of Biblical inspiration.

He was aware that some of his day had little regard for the Old Testament. They saw it as a book of stories given to the Jews and out of date. Not so, says Luther, for "however simple they may seem, these are the very words, works, judgments, and deeds of the majesty, power, and wisdom of the Most High God." In the Old Testament we "find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies. . . . Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them."¹⁹

In this spirit of appreciation of the meaning of the Old Testament Luther could go from the beginnings of the Biblical record in Genesis, which he called "an exceedingly evangelical book," to Deuteronomy, which "contains nothing else than faith toward God and love toward one's neighbor, for all God's laws come to that."²⁰ All of Moses is a "well of wisdom and understanding, out of which has sprung all the prophets knew and said."²¹ The book of Job is "written for our comfort," and its language is more vigorous and splendid than that of any other book in all the Scripture. As we might expect, Luther found the Psalter grand and beautiful, "a precious and beloved book," which "might well be called a little Bible" since it contains "briefly everything that is in the entire Bible."²² The various books ascribed to Solomon he likened to a prayer book for daily use, or a book of comfort, or a song of praise; and Proverbs he recommended especially for use in dealing with young people. The prophets received Luther's praise from the great Isaiah, who prophesied "more clearly and in more ways" of the coming kingdom of Christ than any other prophet, to Malachi whose book "contains beautiful sayings about Christ and the gospel." But it is Daniel who received the longest, the most derailed, and the loftiest preface of all the prophets, so that we may "see what a splendid, great man Daniel was in the sight of both God and the world," for he prophesied of Christ so precisely and well that "one cannor miss the coming of Christ unless one does it willfully."²³

Luther, then, held the Old Testament in highest esteem because it provides "the ground and proof of the New Testament." It contains the Scriptures of which Christ says in John 5(:39), "Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to Me." "And what is the New Testament but a

public preaching and proclamation of Christ, set forth through the sayings of the Old Testament and fulfilled through Christ?"²⁴

It happens that in Luther's prefaces to the books of the New Testament we meet statements of evaluation that stand in seeming contradiction to the general tone of his introductions of the Old Testament books. These have caused differences of opinion among scholars, some of whom argue, as did R. E. Davies,²⁵ that Luther limited the truly inspired books to a relatively small selection from the Bible.

Luther himself apparently never worried over the problem of limiting inspiration in the New Testament canon to certain books. He never challenged the unity of either the Old Testament or the New, or of all the books of the Bible taken together, but he did point out a difference of content or spiritual atmosphere and aim of the two great divisions of the Bible. Here is his evaluation: "Just as the Old Testament is a Book in which are written God's laws and commandments, together with the history of those who kept and those who did not keep them, so the New Testament is a Book in which are written the gospel and the promises of God, together with the history of those who believe and of those who do not believe them."²⁶

As he continues the general preface to the New Testament he uses statements such as these: "this gospel of God or New Testament," or "this report and encouraging tidings, or evangelical and divine news, is also called a New Testament." Then in discussing the true and noblest books of the New Testament, he gives a personal, subjective appreciation of the most essential writings of the New Testament. Thus he places John's Gospel high above the other three, and the epistles of Paul and also Peter "far surpass the other three gospels."

In a final summation of the books of the New Testament he offers this judgment: "In a word St. John's Gospel and his first epistle, St. Paul's epistles, especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, and St. Peter's first epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that is necessary and salvatory for you to know, even if you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. Therefore St. James' epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to these others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it. But more of this in the other prefaces."²⁷

Now, there is nothing disturbing about this entire paragraph unless it be the statement about James. Every reader of Holy Scripture has his favorite passages. What churchgoer has not heard John 3:16 extolled as the greatest text in the Bible or Psalm 19 praised as the wonder of all Psalms? Such judgments are purely subjective and in no way impinge on the inspiration

of Scripture. After all, is there not a difference between, let us say, the book of Esther in the Old Testament and the book of Isaiah? Or shall the epistle of Jude in the New Testament be given the same theological significance as Paul's Romans?

As for Luther, he never rejected the epistle of James objectively; rather he used it, praised it, and considered it a good book "because it sets up no doctrines of men but vigorously promulgates the law of God."²⁸ The Catholic Church had built its sacrament of extreme unction on James 5:14, 15. Luther used the same verses to demolish this sacrament, and in this connection he said: "James purposefully and carefully made provision for the view I am propounding, for he did not ascribe the promise of healing and of the forgiveness of sins to the unction, but to the prayer of faith. His words are: 'And the prayer of faith shall heal the sick, and the Lord shall cure him; and if he have committed sins, it shall be forgiven him.'"²⁹

Such were Luther's words about James. However, it seems that he denied steadfastly apostolicity to the epistle, something he also did to Jude and to the Apocalypse, both of which he quoted and valued. On the book of Revelation he clearly changed his early view where he actually denied inspiration to the book. After 1530 he still doubted that John the apostle was the author, but in his commentary on the Revelation he added significantly that "no one should be prevented from regarding this as the work of St. John the apostle," and he proceeded to give an extensive interpretation of the book. He wanted all Christian people to understand "that they are all kings and priests" and "that through and beyond all plagues, beasts, and evil angels Christ is nonetheless with His saints, and wins the final victory."³⁰

All of these questions and subjective criticisms by Luther of a small part of the Bible do not warrant the conclusion that he was highly critical of its content and limited its inspiration to a relatively small part that definitely preached Christ according to his own feelings on that point. On the contrary, his entire line of defense was Scripture alone! Scripture alone! He used all of it in his arguments and writings. He rejected even "the holy teachings of the church" and insisted that he would trust them "only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, which has never erred." He settled the whole problem of spiritual authority in the assertion: "Scripture alone is the true Lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for?"³¹ And in his great reply of 1521 to Latomus, professor of theology at the University of Louvain, who had attacked him for offending the superiors in the church, Luther reasoned that respect for superiors should not go to the extent "of

offending against the Word of God—which is God Himself."

Luther clearly held to the inspiration of all the Bible. When he talked about some books of the Bible as not being on a par with others, he was expressing a subjective opinion or, as he admits in the case of the book of Revelation, a failure to understand their contents. He was not indicting the canon of Holy Scripture, the inspiration of which he steadfastly upheld.

As pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, Luther's concept of the term "the Word of God" encompassed anything that deals with God's revelation of Himself to His chosen saints through Christ as witnessed to by the Holy Spirit. In the first instance the Word of God is God's secret, spoken with Himself from all eternity and unknown even to angels. This Word created all things but was Itself not created. The Holy Spirit testifies to this fact first in the Genesis record of creation and then in the Gospel of John the apostle. But not only the Genesis record and John's Gospel acclaim the Word as Christ, but the entire Scriptures exist divinely to bear witness to the fact of God's revelation of Himself through Christ. This is the whole function of the Word of God in whatever form it may assume or manner in which it may be proclaimed.

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2. LW 22, p. 9.
3. LW 22, p. 11.
4. LW 22, p. 13.
5. LW 22, p. 14.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *The Problem of Authority in the Continental Reformers: A Study in Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin* (London: The Epworth Press, 1946), page 54.
9. *Ibid.* p. 56.
10. WA 50, p. 282.
11. WA 3, p. 486.
12. WA 40, II, p. 254.
13. WA 54, p. 39.
14. WA 48, p. 102.
15. See Luther's comments on Gen. 30:14-16 in LW 5, pp. 351-356; and on Gal. 2:6 in LW 26, p. 92.
16. WA 54, p. 35.
17. LW 54, No. 674.
18. See the translations of the most important prefaces found in *Luther's Works*, 35, pp. 227-411, which includes also his prefaces to the *Apocrypha*.
19. LW 35, p. 236.
20. LW 35, p. 238.
21. LW 35, p. 247.
22. LW 35, p. 254.

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23. LW 35, pp. 313, 314.
24. LW 35, p. 235.
25. *Ibid.*
26. LW 35, p. 358.
27. LW 35, p. 362.
28. LW 35, p. 395.
29. B. L. Woolf, ed., *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther* (London, 1952), Vol. 1, pp. 323, 324.
30. LW 35, p. 411.
31. LW 32, pp. 11, 12.

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In his treatise on *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, written in 1520, Luther directed his most devastating polemic against the sacramental system of the Roman Church. In the end he retained only two of the seven sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, and of these two he rejoiced in the thought that baptism had come down through the centuries the least sullied by theological interpretations and "godless monsters of greed and superstition." Here are his words of praise:

"Blessed be God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to the riches of His mercy (Ephesians 1:3, 7) has preserved in His church this sacrament at least, untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men, and has made it free to all nations and classes of mankind, and has not permitted it to be oppressed by the filthy and godless monsters of greed and superstition."¹

So singular a regard for one sacrament, while he eliminated four completely and modified or fused penance and the Lord's Supper into one sacrament, deserves careful study. What did Luther teach concerning baptism? Did he begin his career as a Reformer with a liberal view, even to advocacy of immersion, only to retreat with age into a rigid and intolerant conservatism that defied all attempts on the part of other Reformers, notably the Anabaptists, to convince him of an erroneous view on the subject?

There is no lack of sources for a study of this subject. From 1519 to 1539 Luther stated his views on baptism repeatedly and with detailed analysis. From 1528-1539 he preached no less than twenty-five known sermons on the subject. Obviously he regarded baptism as extremely significant. How significant and why?

All of Luther's writings and utterances on the subject, except one, are

polemical. In 1519 he published in German what he called *A Sermon on the Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism*, a carefully prepared and non-polemical treatise. It was immediately recognized as a work of fundamental importance, and it was to retain this high standing throughout succeeding generations.

The treatise opens with this paragraph: "Baptism is *baptismos* in Greek, and *mercio* in Latin, and means to plunge something completely into the water, so that the water covers it. Although in many places it is no longer customary to thrust and dip infants into the font, but only with the hand to pour the baptismal water upon them out of the font, nevertheless the former is what should be done. It would be proper, according to the meaning of the word *Taufe*, that the infant, or whoever is to be baptized, should be put in and sunk completely into the water and then drawn out again. For even in the German tongue the word *Taufe* comes undoubtedly from the word *tief* (deep) and means that what is baptized is sunk deeply into the water. This usage is also demanded by the significance of baptism itself. For baptism, as we shall hear, signifies that the old man and the sinful birth of flesh and blood are to be wholly drowned by the grace of God. We should therefore do justice to its meaning and make baptism a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies."²

It would be difficult even for Luther to be more explicit regarding the mode of baptism than he was in this opening statement of all his writings on the subject. In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, dated 1520, he reiterated his view on the mode of baptism. He wrote of "immersing the person to be baptized," called the act "not man's baptism, but Christ's and God's baptism," and asserted that it should be seen as an act "by which the Lord sitting in heaven thrusts you under the water with His own hands."³ He spoke of the minister "immersing the child in the water." He held that baptism is a "symbol of death and resurrection" and "for this reason," he continued, "I would have those who are to be baptized completely immersed in the water, as the Word says and as the mystery indicates."⁴

Language such as this could lead us to believe that Luther was a confirmed advocate of immersion. That is not the case. In the very moment that he urged complete immersion in the water, he added: "Not that I deem this necessary, but because it would be well to give to a thing so perfect and complete a sign that is also complete and perfect. And this is doubtless the way in which it was instituted by Christ. The sinner does not so much need to be washed as he needs to die, in order to be wholly renewed and made another creature, and to be conformed to the death and resurrection

of Christ, with whom he dies and rises again through baptism. Similarly it is far more forceful to say that baptism signifies that we die in every way and rise to eternal life, than to say that it signifies merely that we are washed clean of sins."⁵

Such was Luther's final word on the right mode of baptism. There is no reason to believe that he ever changed his thought in this regard, nor is there any reason to hold that he practiced immersion. The whole subject of how baptism should be performed did not seem to him to be one of Scriptural necessity or to lie in the realm of the actual, but rather in the ideal. And as he became embroiled in controversy with the Anabaptists, his early emphasis on immersion receded, while other phases of his thinking on the subject became supreme.

From the beginning to the end of his career Luther steadfastly believed that baptism is a "holy and blessed sacrament," the only one to come through the centuries "untouched and untainted by the ordinances of men." This is a most important fact to remember when we consider his utterances and polemics on the subject. In medieval Catholic theology sacrament denotes a metaphysical change which occurs in the elements; a sacrament is therefore considered inherently efficacious. In the case of the sacrament of baptism the recipient is cleansed from original sin and given an indelible character for life, making rebaptism unnecessary. Since the sacrament is necessary for salvation, infants must be baptized. In an emergency, when a priest is not available, a layman can perform the act.

Luther himself defined sacrament as "a mystery or secret thing, which is set forth in words, but received by faith in the heart."⁶ He found in the sacraments as such "no power efficacious for justification" and declared that they are not "effective signs of grace."⁷ The scholastics have completely misunderstood them, said Luther, "for if the sacrament confers grace on me because I receive it, then indeed I receive grace by virtue of my work, and not by faith; and I gain not the promise in the sacraments but only the sign instituted and commanded by God."⁸

Applied to baptism this language can mean only that no one is benefited or justified by the mere act of baptism. The only effective thing in baptism is faith—"faith in that word of promise to which baptism is added." It is faith that justifies, it is faith that fulfills that which baptism signifies, for faith is the submersion of the old man and the emerging of the new.

Thus Luther built his doctrine of faith into the sacrament of baptism. He called faith of "all things the most necessary, for it is the ground of all comfort." Whoever does not have faith in baptism must despair of his sins.

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The divine promise is: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved."⁹ "This promise," according to Luther, "must be set far above all the glitter of works, vows, religious orders, and whatever else man has introduced, for on it all our salvation depends. But we must so consider it as to exercise our faith in it, and have no doubt whatever that once we have been baptized, we are saved. For unless faith is present or is conferred in baptism, baptism will profit us nothing; indeed, it will become a hindrance to us, not only at the moment when it is received, but throughout the rest of our lives."¹⁰

The reason Luther recoiled at the very thought of a lack of faith in baptism was that it accuses God's promise of salvation of being a lie, and that is the greatest of all sins.

Obviously, Luther set great store on faith in the sacrament of baptism. The candidate must believe the promise of God. This is not easy to do, Luther insisted, because our human nature finds it most difficult to believe that it is saved or will be saved, and without this belief it cannot be saved.¹¹ But if the one baptized has faith, the minister who confers baptism may even be wicked and evil without impairing the efficacy of the sacrament.¹² The reason for this certainty is that one is baptized, not by man, but by the "Triune God Himself, through a man acting among us in His name."¹³

Faith and belief, then, being present in baptism, the sacramental effect of the ordinance is clear. Whenever someone comes forth out of baptism, "he is truly pure, without sin, and wholly guiltless." In the sacrament God allies Himself with the baptized one and enters with him into a "gracious covenant of comfort."¹⁴ That is to say, baptism is the beginning of a completely new set of relationships between the one baptized and God. As in the old covenant circumcision was the sign of membership in God's chosen people, so "baptism is an external sign or token, which so separates us from all men not baptized that we are thereby known as a people of Christ, our Leader, under whose banner of the holy cross we continually fight against sin."¹⁵

"Thus you see how rich a Christian is, that is, one who has been baptized! Even if he would, he could not lose his salvation, however much he sinned, unless he refused to believe. For no sin can condemn him save unbelief alone. All other sins, so long as the faith in God's promise made in baptism returns or remains, are immediately blotted out through that same faith, or rather through the truth of God, because He cannot deny Himself if you confess Him and faithfully cling to Him in His promise."¹⁶

Baptism, then, in Luther's teaching, signifies full and complete justification. But his interpretation of the sacrament is not thereby exhausted. For it means also death and resurrection, and this is perhaps the most important point in

Luther's teaching on baptism. We quote an illuminating passage from his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*:

"When the minister immerses the child in the water, it signifies death; and when he draws it forth again, it signifies life. Thus Paul expounds it in Romans 6(:4): 'We were buried therefore with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.' This death and resurrection we call the new creation, regeneration, and spiritual birth. This should not be understood only allegorically as the death of sin and the life of grace, as many understand it, but as actual death and resurrection. For baptism is not a false sign. Neither does sin completely die, nor grace completely rise, until the sinful body that we carry about in this life is destroyed, as the apostle says in the same passage (Romans 6:6, 7). For as long as we are in the flesh, the desires of the flesh stir and are stirred. For this reason, as soon as we begin to believe, we also begin to die to this world and live to God in the life to come; so that faith is truly a death and a resurrection, that is, it is that spiritual baptism into which we are submerged and from which we rise."¹⁷

This is the core of Luther's teaching on baptism. The immersed infant comes forth sacramentally pure, his sin drowned in the baptismal waters. This is a death and a resurrection by faith, a spiritual baptism that ends in death.

Baptism also signifies the resurrection of the body at the last day. That is, the sacrament of baptism is not completed until God "thrusts us into the earth again by death, and makes us over at the last day, that we may be perfect and without sin."¹⁸

Viewed in this light, baptism becomes an integral part of Luther's much-emphasized doctrine of a person being at the same time both just and sinner. For the drowning of sin in baptism cannot be fulfilled completely in this life; it happens only when the baptized person passes through bodily death and decays to dust. Luther enlarges upon this point. The act or sign of baptism is quickly completed, but the drowning of sin, or the spiritual baptism, which the public act signifies, lasts as long as life and is "completed only in death. Then it is that a person is completely sunk in baptism, and that which baptism signifies comes to pass."¹⁹ Our whole life, then, is but a spiritual baptism that ends in death. The one baptized is condemned to die.

Notice Luther's conclusion: "A baptized person is therefore sacramentally pure and guiltless. This means nothing else than that he has the sign of God, that is to say, he has the baptism by which it is shown that his sins are all

to be dead, and that he too is to die in grace and at the last day is to rise again to everlasting life, pure, sinless, and guiltless. With respect to the sacrament, then, it is true that he is without sin and guilt. Yet because all is not yet completed and he still lives in sinful flesh, he is not without sin. But although not pure in all things, he has begun to grow into purity and innocence.²⁰

Luther, then, stressed the view that baptism signifies death—the baptized is condemned to die. But he must also live all the while that he is dying. And his living is as important as his dying. Further, his life is a constant struggle against sin and evil. This spiritual warfare begins as he comes forth from baptism sacramentally pure and guiltless. For although sacramentally pure, he is not really pure; he is actually "full of evil inclinations." He has begun to become pure, and he "has a sign and covenant of this purity," that is, he is pure by the "gracious imputation of God," not by the virtues of his own nature.²¹

What Luther affirmed is that in baptism a covenant relationship begins that God will forgive sins if the baptized will fight on after baptism as long as he lives. God will not desert His child but will keep His promise forever. This is the life of faith to which a person must cling though all sins attack him. To doubt God's promise is to make Him a liar.

Nor should one baptized be terrified when evil lust assails him nor despair even if he falls. Then he should remember his baptism and comfort himself with the fact that God, through the Holy Spirit, has pledged Himself to "slay his sin for him and not to count it a cause for condemnation," if only he will not say Yes to sin and remain in it. "Moreover these wild thoughts and appetites, and even a fall into sin, should not be regarded as an occasion for despair. Regard them rather as an admonition from God that we should remember our baptism and what was there spoken, that we should call upon God's mercy and exercise ourselves in striving against sin, that we should even welcome death in order that we may be rid of sin."²²

In this passage it may appear that Luther put a premium on sinning. That was far from his thought. No religious leader had a keener sense of sin than he. God's judgment can endure no sin, and no sin is so small as not to condemn us. But sin and sinning, he affirmed, are broken by the power of the sacrament of baptism and by the covenant God makes in baptism, and hence evil thoughts and appetites that are at work within us after baptism are no longer imputed but winked at by a merciful God.

This, Luther believed, is both the strength and the comfort of the sacrament. It works as a protective force in us; it blunts the power of sin, pro-

vided the baptized is "constantly striving and desiring to conquer" sins and be rid of them at death. Hence baptism can never become useless unless one despairs and refuses to return to the salvation given in the sacrament. "We are therefore never without the sign of baptism nor without the thing it signifies."²³

Baptism, therefore, according to Luther, is the spiritual underpinning bestowed on the Christian by the Triune God. It gives him freedom to do many good works, and it offers him many opportunities to endure trials and sufferings for God. The church was at its best in those early times when it suffered most and martyrs were put to death daily, for in this way the Christians fulfilled their baptism. "When we do not suffer, we are not tested, and then our baptism is invalidated," complained Luther.²⁴

We may point out that Luther anchored his faith in his own baptism at moments of crisis in his career. Thus in 1520 when he determined to burn the papal bull, *Exurge Domine*, threatening him with dire consequences should he not recant, he placed his act of burning on the high plane of his baptismal grace in such words as these:

"You Leo X and you Lord Cardinals of Rome and whomsoever is of any importance at Rome. I upbraid you and say freely to your faces: If the Bull has gone forth in your name and with your knowledge and you recognize it as yours, then I shall make use of my power by virtue of my baptism, by which I became a child of God and a coheir with Christ, to exhort and admonish you in the Lord that you take to heart your diabolic blasphemies and put an end to your audacious blasphemies and that without delay."²⁵

Whatever we may think of Luther's interpretation of baptism, there can be no doubting the sacramental significance that he placed upon the act. Without baptism Luther's whole religious thought would be impossible. It was the *alpha* of his theology.

All of Luther's thinking on the subject centered in infant baptism. He took over the complete practice of the medieval Church without questioning any part of the public ceremony, except certain magical accretions such as the use of chrism, or consecrated oil. In accepting the traditional form of infant baptism he followed also the public law of his day which enjoined the baptism of every child born in the Christian state. In 1528 he wrote in his *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*: "Baptism shall be retained as hitherto, and children are to be baptized."²⁶ This, we might call Luther's official pronouncement on the subject, but he never questioned the efficacy of child baptism.

In the *Babylonian Captivity*, of 1520, he brought up the problem of

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infant baptism. "In contradistinction to what has been said," he declared, "some might cite the baptism of infants who do not comprehend the promise of God and cannot have the faith of baptism; so that therefore either faith is not necessary or else infant baptism is without effect. Here I say what all say: Infants are aided by the faith of others, namely, those who bring them for baptism. For the Word of God is powerful enough, when uttered, to change even a godless heart, which is no less unresponsive and helpless than any infant. So through the prayer of the believing church which presents it, a prayer to which all things are possible (Mark 9:23), the infant is changed, cleansed, and renewed by inpoured faith."²⁷

This is the language of the Roman Church, going back to Augustine, elaborated by Thomas Aquinas, and made the church faith by Clement V at the Council of Vienna, 1311, 1312. Luther never rejected the sacrament as such but repeatedly said he was attacking only its abuses and the accretions made on it throughout time.

About 1528 the Reformer became involved in a bitter polemic with the Anabaptists over baptism. This controversy forced him to restate his views and also to forge new arguments for his cause. It seems that two Catholic priests asked his advice on how to deal with the Anabaptists. His reply came in 1528 in a considerable treatise *Concerning Baptism*,²⁸ his most significant treatment of the subject of child baptism, revealing his scholastic capacity for dialectic and his grim determination to slay his opponents by arguments.

Balthasar Hubmaier, the great leader of early Anabaptism, in 1525 published an apology entitled *The Christian Baptism of Believers*, a work that may still be considered the classic argument for adult baptism, and in 1527 a shorter treatise *On Infant Baptism*.²⁹ Further, he mentioned Luther and other Christian leaders, such as Erasmus and Leo Jud, as witnesses to the fact that baptism was not established for little children.³⁰

Luther disowned the use of his name by Hubmaier and called Hubmaier's booklet on rebaptism "blasphemous" and his views "perverted." But before Luther entered upon his refutation of Anabaptism, he penned a noble statement on the then raging persecution of these "erring" children of the times. "Still, it is not right, and I truly grieve, that these miserable folks should be so lamentably murdered, burned, and tormented to death. We should allow everyone to believe what he wills. If his faith be false, he will be sufficiently punished in eternal hellfire. Why then should we martyr these people also in this world, if their error be in faith alone and they are not guilty of rebellion or opposition to the government? Dear God, how quickly

a person can become confused and fall into the trap of the devil! By the Scriptures and the Word of God, we ought to guard against and withstand him. By fire we accomplish little."³¹

Luther opened his attack on the Anabaptists by accusing them of going too far in their attempts at changes and thereby causing souls to be lost. If they would only let baptism and the sacrament of the altar "stand as they are," Christians under the pope would be saved, but now Christians would "most likely be lost since even Christ Himself is thereby taken away." He urged a more cautious and discreet approach that attacks the accretion "which threatens the temple without destroying the temple of God."³²

Luther then moved into his standard arguments against Anabaptism. He had heard that rebaptizers question the fact of their child baptism. "How do you know you have been baptized?" they say. Luther enlarged upon the theme of knowing. How does anyone know who is his mother, father, sister, brother, relative, ruler, or pope, et cetera? The answers are fairly obvious, and so Luther concluded that he who will not believe that he is baptized is sinning against God.

Luther's argument seems hypothetical, if not puerile. Surely Hubmaier advanced no such childish theme. He believed firmly in the sacrament of baptism, but denied that infant baptism is the true Scriptural mode and insisted stoutly that adult baptism is the first and only rite of the sacrament. In Hubmaier's view children were not baptized. Luther was not fully informed of Anabaptist teaching in this matter.

However, on the next point of difference over baptism, the Reformer was not mistaken. The Anabaptists made much of the words of Christ: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved." Mark 16:16. To them the verse meant that before he believes and professes Christ no one should be baptized. Luther charged them "guilty of a great presumption" and argued the principle of certainty of belief. "How and when can they know that for certain?" Have they become gods able to understand the hearts of men and know whether or not they believe? "Are they not contradicting themselves when they baptize without being certain if faith is there or not?"

Then Luther makes a sweeping statement on the subject of belief and faith in the sacrament of baptism: "For whosoever bases baptism on faith and baptizes on chance and not on certainty that faith is present does nothing better than he who baptizes him who has no faith. For unbelief and uncertain belief are one and the same thing and both are contrary to the verse, 'Whosoever believes,' which speaks of a sure faith which they who are to be baptized should have."³³

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He presses the point of certainty. Neither the baptizer nor the baptized can know that "certain faith" is present in baptism; both are "uncertain of their faith." For the verse (Mark 16:16) does not say, "Whosoever knows that he believes," but it says, "Whosoever believes." "Who has it, has it," Luther insists. "One must believe, but we neither should nor can know it for certain."³⁴ Since baptism cannot be based on a certainty of faith, it follows that the rebaptizers never truly baptized anyone, and even if they did baptize a person "a hundred times a day" they would never know "if he believes." Hence they do not follow the meaning of Mark 16:16 in a syllable.³⁵

With this kind of reasoning Luther thinks to demolish the Anabaptist practice of adult baptism. He then proceeds to establish the practice of infant baptism. First, he invokes tradition. Infants had been baptized from the beginning of Christianity so that it had become a custom to baptize children. Further, no one can prove that they do not have faith, wherefore a new mode of baptism should not be built on such weak arguments as the rebaptizers produce. The abolition of traditional customs should not be attempted without convincing proofs that they "are contrary to the Word of God."

But how can they be sure that children do not believe? On what scripture can they build? They must imagine this "because children do not speak or have understanding." Such a fancy is deceptive and "altogether false," and we cannot build on imagination.³⁶

Luther then offers a series of Biblical incidents to illustrate the thesis that children can and do have faith. Psalm 72 (actually Psalm 106:37 and onward) describes, he says, how Israelites offered their sons and daughters to idols, thus shedding innocent blood. But the children could not give innocent blood unless they were considered as pure and holy, and that condition involved faith. The children whom Herod murdered were not over two years of age, that is, too young to understand, yet they were all holy and blessed. Christ Himself says in Matthew 19:14, "The kingdom of heaven belongs to children," and He commands us to bring the children to Him for to them belongs the kingdom of heaven.³⁷

But the most daring and questionable argument for child faith he finds in the experience of Elisabeth at the moment when Mary as a visitor greeted her: "For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1:44, RSV). Luther draws from this incident, involving two yet unborn babes, the certainty of faith on the part of the unborn John. It was the unborn Christ who spoke through His mother to John, and produced faith in him though still unborn.

Here is Luther's argument: "Who has made you so sure that baptized chil-

dren do not believe in the face of what I here prove that they can believe? But if you are not sure, why then are you so bold as to discard the first baptism, since you do not and cannot know that it is meaningless? What if all children in baptism not only were able to believe but believed as well as John in his mother's womb? We can hardly deny that the same Christ is present at baptism and in baptism, in fact is Himself the baptizer, who in those days came in His mother's womb to John. In baptism He can speak as well through the mouth of the priest, as when He spoke through His mother. Since, then, He is present, speaks, and baptizes, why should not His Word and baptism call forth spirit and faith in the child as then it produced faith in John? He is the same one who speaks and acts then and now. Even before, He had said to Isaiah (Isaiah 55:11), 'His word shall not return empty.' Now it is up to you to bring forth a single Scripture verse which proves that children cannot believe in baptism. I have cited these many verses showing that they can believe, and that it is reasonable to hold that they do believe. I grant that we do not understand how they do believe or how faith is created. But that is not the point here."³⁸

Apart from the physiological-magical problems involved in the Jesus-John prenatal meeting, which so great an exegete as Luther could and should have recognized,³⁹ it seems that the Reformer goes far afield in his dialectic to establish infant baptism. First he denies that belief, and certainty of it, is present in adult baptism. The Anabaptists cannot meet the demands of one syllable of Mark 16:16. An adult can deceive and come to Christ as a Judas and have himself baptized. "But a child cannot deceive. He comes to Christ in baptism, as John came to Him, and as the children were brought to Him, that His word and work might be effective in them, move them, and make them holy, because His word and work cannot be without fruit. Yet it has this effect *alone* in the child. Were it to fail here it would fail everywhere and be in vain, which is impossible."⁴⁰

In 1528 Luther wrote, or approved of, Melanchthon's *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Saxony*. In this manual for inspectors of the conditions and beliefs in Lutheran churches, the sacrament of baptism was given the "same import as circumcision," that is, as the "children were circumcised, so also children shall be baptized." Luther used the same argument against the Anabaptists. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants to be their God, and made circumcision a sign of this covenant. In the same manner God has covenanted with all the world to be a God of the heathen, and so Christ commanded the gospel to be preached in all the world and instituted baptism as a sign of this gospel command.⁴¹

Here Luther again shifted the point of emphasis. Baptism has become a sacrament, not based so much on faith as on the command and will of God. To be sure, he hastened to say that "one should add faith to baptism." Then he added: "But we are not to base baptism on faith. There is quite a difference between having faith, on the one hand, and depending on one's faith and making baptism depend on faith, on the other. Whoever allows himself to be baptized on the strength of his faith, is not only uncertain, but also an idolater who denies Christ."⁴²

The circumcision-baptism analogy, so completely rejected by the Anabaptists, was obviously very important, indeed fundamental, with Luther. The Anabaptists insisted that in infant baptism faith cannot be present in the act.⁴³ Luther retorted that that would make no difference to him. He wanted to know their reason for rebaptizing later when faith or the confession of faith was supposedly present. Infant baptism is, he argued, a correct baptism, that is, the correct words were spoken, "and everything that pertains to baptism was done as fully as when faith is present." Now, if a thing is in itself correct it need not be repeated even though it was not correctly received. We correct only what was wrong but do not have to do the entire thing over again. Luther illustrated his argument by asserting that if baptism is correctly administered in all details to the child, and if faith appears in the one baptized ten years later, there is no need for a rebaptism. "For faith does not exist for the sake of baptism, but baptism for the sake of faith. When faith comes baptism is complete. A second baptism is not necessary."⁴⁴

So certain was Luther of the sacramental power of infant baptism that he insisted that even though a Christian should sin or fall from faith "a thousand times a year," he would need no rebaptism provided he "rights himself and becomes faithful." The Anabaptists simply "fly in the face of God, nature, and reason," and they abuse baptism when they repeat the sacrament. For the power of baptism does not lie in its being repeated or spoken anew but in the fact that it was commanded once to be spoken.⁴⁵

Here we have reached the unbridgeable gulf between the Anabaptists and Luther. Hubmaier believed that baptism is a sacrament instituted by Christ, hence it must be followed. He even considered it more important than the Lord's Supper. But he did not hold it to be a means of grace in the Catholic or in Luther's sense. Luther saw in baptism the covenant relationship of the New Testament between God and the baptized following upon the old covenant relationship between God and the circumcised Israel, and he was ready to use almost any dialectic to prove his case. God had preserved baptism intact while all kinds of heresies had come and gone, and that was a miracle and

proof that child baptism must be right. Child baptism had been followed for more than a thousand years. If it had not been right, there would have been no baptism and no Christendom during those ages, "which is impossible." The miraculous preservation of child baptism through the centuries was to Luther positive proof that it is right. An institution of the church which had so long a tradition could not be wrong even though from "Scripture we cannot clearly conclude that you could establish child baptism as a practice among the first Christians after the apostles."⁴⁶

This last statement is the nearest Luther came to recognizing any aspect of the Anabaptist argument against infant baptism, and he immediately reverted to his basic disagreement with them by saying that everyone ought properly to shun and avoid them as "messengers of none other than the devil, sent out into the world to blasphem the Word and ordinance of God so that people might not believe therein and be saved."

One aspect of Luther's polemic on baptism must now receive our attention. The Anabaptists denied baptism all significance as a means of grace. This reduces the outward sign, water, to common water. Luther accused them of likening child baptism to a dog's bath, a term that surely did not come from Hubmaier. But regardless of comparisons which the Anabaptists might make, to Martin Luther their language on baptism was all blasphemy. How did he arrive at this conviction?

In his *Babylonian Captivity* Luther called baptism an "external sign or token" that the one baptized is thrust into the water and drawn out again. Clearly, he here challenged the Catholic doctrine that baptism is a sacrament that conveys grace automatically to the baptized. He emphasized the outward act, a fact which led him to minimize the importance of the sign while stressing Christ's promise of salvation given in Mark 16:16. However, in his polemic with the Anabaptists, it seems he was forced to rethink his earlier stand on the sacrament. His opponents denied that baptism has any efficacy as such; it is an act of obedience on the part of the believer and a sign of confessing Christ openly before men.

In his early writings on the subject, Luther had already gone beyond this interpretation of baptism. The facts that God instituted the rite, that God Himself is the actual baptizer, that it is done in the name of the Trinity, and that "it works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe"—all these and more of the early Luther views indicate how far he was removed from Hubmaier's teaching on the subject.

It does not seem strange, then, that Luther should say in his polemic with

the rebaptizers, and in his catechisms of 1529, "Baptism is not simple water only, but it is the water comprehended in God's command and connected with God's Word."⁴⁷

These words complete Luther's doctrine of baptism. The water is sacramental water, made so by God's command. He explained this fully in a longer statement in answer to his own question:

"How can water do such great things?

"Answer: It is not the water indeed that does them, but the word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts such word of God in the water. For without the word of God the water is simple water, and no baptism. But with the word of God it is baptism, that is, a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost."⁴⁸

The decisive thing in Luther's sacramental concept is plainly the divine command or institution. The word of God makes the water sacramental water which "signifies penitence, contrition, and sorrow." By the word of God the water becomes God's water, a heavenly water. In a sermon that Luther preached January 25, 1534, he used the illustration of fire in a hot iron, which becomes more fire than iron until one sees only fire and forgets the iron. So the baptismal water becomes *durch Gottet*, "God through and through," that is, the corporeal element water becomes a spiritual element through the "name of the Father and the Son, and this name is pure spirit and power." When the Anabaptists made the water in baptism common water and compared it to cattle drinking water or human bath water, they flew in the face of God and blasphemed His name.⁴⁹

When Luther said that the word of God makes baptism a sacrament, he meant, of course, that Christ is the agent through whom it is done. All sacraments must come through Christ. It was the risen Christ who commanded His disciples to baptize all nations, and a command by Christ is a command by God. When Luther said that the baptismal water is "God through and through," he meant that it is likewise Christ through and through, that is, Christ is totally and actually present in baptism just as He is present in the Lord's Supper. He gives Himself in the sacrament of baptism; He takes over the baptized one and unites him with Himself. In the present life this lies hidden in faith, to be revealed only at the resurrection on the last day.

We may end Luther's polemic with the Anabaptists with one of his last statements on what he considered the mistaken view of his opponents. In his sermon on January 25, 1538, he said with an air of triumph: "You see then, that the Anabaptists are blind fools and deceivers, who understand nothing of God's Word and works; and therefore they sin doubly against

holy baptism. In the first place, they blaspheme and damn through their doctrine the true baptism; secondly, they give no one the right baptism; and so they have, in truth, no baptism; rather their baptism is a purely trumped-up affair."⁵⁰

The question was raised at the beginning of our study: Did Luther in the early stage of his career hold a different or more Biblical view of baptism than he did in later life?

If by the question we mean that he changed his doctrine on baptism as a sacrament of the church, instituted by God and commanded by Christ to be administered to all people that embraced the visible kingdom of Christ on earth, the answer must be No. He accepted the traditional sacrament of the medieval church but freed it, as he insisted, of the dross of having inherent efficacious power by virtue of its being a sacrament. His advocacy of immersion added nothing new to baptism, for the medieval church had for centuries permitted the practice, and Luther, like the Roman Church, never made immersion obligatory.

But if there was no change in Luther's basic thought on the subject of baptism, there was, it seems, a considerable shift of emphasis. This appears in his polemic with the Anabaptists; indeed, it is because of this battle that we know Luther's deepest thought on baptism.

The first thing that arrests our attention is the subject of belief or faith as a factor in baptism. Basing his remarks on Mark 16:16, Luther leaves no room for doubt that belief must be present in baptism and must continue throughout life. Only unbelief condemns the baptized. Baptism is a sacrament of justifying faith, and all its efficacy "consists in faith itself, not in the doing of a work."⁵¹ He raises the question of infants who do not have the faith of baptism and answers by saying that infants are aided by the faith of those who bring them to baptism, and by the prayer of the believing church which presents them, so that they are "changed, cleansed, and renewed by inpoured faith," just as the paralytic was healed by the faith of others (Mark 2:3-12).⁵²

The infant, then, must be in or receive a plethora of faith in baptism. Not so is the Anabaptist candidate. He cannot know for sure that he believes. The Anabaptists can never know that "certain faith" is present in baptism, and their confession of faith in Christ is likewise blasphemy. This is not the Luther who said the just shall live by his faith. His dialectic makes him appear paradoxical if not actually contradictory.

Luther's shift of emphasis is seen even more in his circumcision-baptism analogy. There was little on this in his early writings; by the time his battle

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with the Anabaptists began, it was a doctrine, based on the covenant relationship between God and his people in both the Old and the New Testament. Christ commanded His disciples to baptize all people just as God commanded every Hebrew male child to be circumcised. Luther did not analyze the analogy carefully; he stated it as the will of God, which must be obeyed. Here we see Luther's teaching on baptism fully developed. The sacrament had become a universal institution that included the whole community and beyond that the entire Christian state or states. To deny or change any part or all of the sacrament, Luther asserted, was heresy and blasphemy; he ultimately viewed it as treason.

This was really the logical end of the Reformer's concept of a sacrament whose scope must embrace every infant because of the divine command and because the Triune God is in the "water through and through." Tolerance toward any other practice or interpretation of the baptismal act Luther found scarcely possible. Just as under the old covenant no Hebrew could escape circumcision, so in the Christian community, he taught, no infant can escape baptism without the most dire social and spiritual consequences.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. LW 36, p. 57.
2. LW 35, p. 29.
3. LW 36, pp. 62, 63.
4. LW 36, p. 68.
5. *Ibid.*
6. LW 36, p. 94.
7. LW 36, p. 67.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Mark 16:16.
10. LW 36, pp. 58, 59.
11. *Ibid.*
12. LW 36, pp. 63, 64.
13. *Ibid.*
14. LW 36, p. 33.
15. LW 36, p. 29.
16. LW 36, pp. 60, 61.
17. LW 36, pp. 67, 68.
18. LW 35, p. 29.
19. LW 35, p. 30.
20. LW 35, pp. 32, 33.
21. LW 35, p. 36.
22. LW 35, p. 35.
23. LW 36, p. 69.
24. *Ibid.*
25. WA 6, p. 604.
26. LW 40, p. 288.
27. LW 36, p. 73.

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28. Found in a good translation in LW 40, pp. 229-262.
29. See G. Westin and T. Bergsten, eds. *Balthasar Hubmaier Schriften* (Gerd Mohn, 1962), pages 118-163, 258-269.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 233. Hubmaier's quotation from Luther was faulty.
31. LW 40, p. 230.
32. LW 40, pp. 233, 234. Luther was speaking of Anabaptists who lived in Catholic territories. He thanked God that they had not yet come to Saxony.
33. LW 40, pp. 239, 240.
34. LW 40, p. 241.
35. LW 40, p. 240.
36. LW 40, pp. 241, 242.
37. *Ibid.*
38. LW 40, pp. 242, 243.
39. It might be inferred that Luther recognized the physiological problem in that he made Jesus come to John through the mouth of His mother Mary. But this, too, is fanciful.
40. LW 40, p. 244.
41. LW 41, p. 252.
42. LW 40, p. 252.
43. Hubmaier rejected infant baptism on the basis that it was no baptism.
44. LW 40, p. 246.
45. LW 40, pp. 248, 249.
46. LW 40, pp. 255, 256.
47. Dr. Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* (English-German Edition. Concordia Publishing House, 1912), page 19. Luther's term translated into the English "simple water" is "schlecht Wasser."
48. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
49. WA 37, pp. 264, 265.
50. WA 37, p. 668.
51. LW 36, p. 65.
52. LW 36, p. 73.

Lord's Supper

W

We have observed Luther's belief that the church was the first institution to be established in the history of man. It was born on the seventh day of creation, the Creator Himself gave the first sermon, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Luther said, was the first sanctuary or center of worship. After the fall of Adam the church continued, but the relationship between the Creator and His church was altered so that the church now became the custodian of the Creator's promises to sinful man, promises of restoration and salvation through Christ. These promises, recorded by the Holy Spirit for use by the church, were communicated to man through the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is God's gift to His church and contains an infallible record of His dealings with the church throughout time.

God not only gave the church His Word to be its basic guideline, but He also gave it the sacraments, the sacred mysteries, or secret things "set forth in words, but received by faith in the heart." Luther found that the New Testament presents two such mysteries—baptism and the Lord's Supper—both of which were ordained by Christ.

In considering Luther's thought on baptism, we found that the Reformer believed that it had come down to his time much in its original purity, without theological interpretations and accretions of superstition.

Not so generous was his judgment on the Lord's Supper. In his first extended statement on the sacrament,¹ which came in 1519, he admitted the propriety of withholding the wine from the laity, but he immediately added as his opinion that it would be a good thing if the church should again reverse its practice and decree in a general council² that the people be given both the bread and the wine. And his reason for giving the sacrament in its entirety to all Christians cuts to the very heart of his doctrine of the sacrament.

Here is his argument: "For this sacrament, as we shall see, signifies the complete union and the undivided fellowship of the saints; and this is poorly and unfittingly indicated by [distributing] only one part of the sacrament. Nor is there as great a danger in the use of the cup as is supposed,³ since the people seldom go to this sacrament. Besides Christ was well aware of all future dangers, and yet He saw fit to institute both kinds for the use of all His Christians."⁴

The Lord's Supper, then, should be given all participants in its entirety because it is a "sacrament of fellowship of all the saints." It is the grand feast where "all the spiritual possessions of Christ and His saints are shared in and become the common property of him who receives this sacrament."

Luther continues: "Again all sufferings and sins also become common property; and thus love engenders love in return and unites. To carry out our homely figure, it is like a city where every citizen shares with all the others the city's name, honor, freedom, trade, custom, wages, help, support, protection, and the like, while at the same time he shares all the dangers of fire and flood, enemies and death, losses, taxes, and the like. For he who would share in the profits must also share in the costs, and ever recompense love with love."⁵

From the analogy of the ideal medieval city Luther passes to that of the human body to illustrate the union of saints in this sacrament. "If anyone's foot hurts him, yes, even the little toe," he argues, "the eye at once looks at it, the fingers grasp it, the face puckers, the whole body bends over to it, and all are concerned with this small member; again, once it is cared for all the other members are beneficial. This comparison must be noted well if one wishes to understand this sacrament."⁶

As the closing thought in Luther's elevated spiritual view of the Lord's Supper we quote: "The immeasurable grace and mercy of God are given us in this sacrament to the end that we might put from us all misery and tribulation (Anfechtung) and lay it upon the community (of saints) and especially on Christ."⁷

The fellowship of Christ and all the saints found in the Lord's Supper, which Luther describes in such moving and eloquent terms, continues until "at last Christ completely destroys sin in us and makes us like Himself." And with this, the last day has come to end all sacraments.

Luther's second argument for the importance and greatness of the Lord's Supper is the fact (as he believes) of Christ's real presence in the forms of bread and wine. Christ gives His natural flesh in the bread, and His natural true blood in the wine, thereby giving or making "a really perfect sacrament

or sign." This he explains as follows:

"For just as the bread is changed into His true natural body and the wine into His natural true blood, so truly we are also drawn and changed into the spiritual body, that is, into the fellowship of Christ and all saints and by this sacrament put into possession of all the virtues and mercies of Christ and His saints. . . . So it is clear from all this that this holy sacrament is nothing else than a divine sign, in which are pledged, granted, and imparted Christ and all saints together with all their works, sufferings, merits, mercies and possessions, for the comfort and strengthening of all who are in anxiety and sorrow, persecuted by devil, sins, the world, the flesh, and every evil. And to receive the sacrament is nothing else than to desire all this and firmly to believe that it is done."⁸

The third and last part of the sacrament, says Luther, is faith "on which everything depends." A knowledge of what the sacrament is and signifies, even to its being a glorious fellowship and a gracious exchange or blending "of our sin and suffering with the righteousness of Christ and His saints," is not enough. Faith must accept all parts of the sacrament and what it signifies. The partaker must be certain that Christ and all His saints come to Him with His flesh and blood to be wholly His and to have all things in common with Him.

"If you will exercise and strengthen this faith," Luther says, "then you will experience what a rich, joyous, and bountiful wedding feast your God has prepared for you upon the altar."⁹

This was Luther in 1519. He was a priest and a professor in the Western Church, and he in no way refused to follow the established way of giving the sacrament of the altar to the people. He would prefer that both kinds were given to the participants, but he found it enough "that the people desire it daily and at present receive one kind, as the Christian church ordains and provides."¹⁰ He did not question such doctrines as transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the mass.

However, Luther stated that he would like to see a general church council restore the practice of giving all persons the sacrament in its entirety. And then he proceeded to treat his wish as fact and to build upon it his moving and deeply spiritual doctrine of the communion and union of Christ and all His saints in the Lord's Supper. It is a deep and complete fellowship of Christ, the saints, and the participants, "a rich, joyous, and bountiful wedding feast," prepared by God for all who come to the altar. It is strength for the living, confidence for the dying, and salvation on the last day. "Thus," said Luther, "the sacrament is for us a ford, a bridge, a door, a ship, and a stretcher

by which and in which we pass from this world into eternal life."¹¹

Such was Luther's basic doctrine in 1519 on the "sacrament of altar." He was not to change noticeably in his main tenets, but he would alter his approach greatly and he would eliminate accretions of centuries as he hewed his way with a sharp ax.

This is seen clearly in his second treatise on the subject, published in July, 1520, under the title *Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass*.¹² He had scarcely begun when he wrote that such forms as singing, organ playing, bell ringing, vestments, ornaments, and gestures are all an addition invented by man. He pointed out that "when Christ Himself first instituted this sacrament and held the first mass, there was no tonsure, no chasuble, no singing, no pageantry, but only thanksgiving to God and the use of the sacrament."¹³

This simple service continued for a long time, he asserted, but gave way until various forms and additions ended in the Roman mass and the Greek mass; and in his day, he said, the chief thing in the mass "has been forgotten, and nothing is remembered except the additions of men!"¹⁴

Such pompous forms are perilous, argued Luther. We must return to the simple institution of Christ. Vestments, bells, songs, ornaments, prayers, processions, elevations, prostrations, and "whatever happens in the mass" must be surrendered and the simple words of Christ restored, "for therein lies the whole mass, its nature, work, profit, and benefit." And the words of Christ are: "Take and eat, this is My body, which is given for you. Take and drink of it, all of you, this is the cup of the new and eternal testament in My blood, which is poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins."¹⁵

At this point, Luther began a critique of the doctrine of the mass as accepted in his time, according to which the Lord's Supper is not only a sacrament but also a sacrifice; that is, the mass is a bloodless repetition of the sacrifice once made on Calvary. This theory involves the doctrine of transubstantiation and also omits or forgets the fact that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament or a testament in which God gives to the participant something, not the participant to God.

Luther attacked and rejected the Roman sacrificial theory. We cannot offer Christ as a sacrifice; He offers us a new and everlasting testament in His blood for the forgiveness of sins. This is forgotten, reasoned Luther, when the mass is understood only as a sacrifice and not as a testament and a sacrament. "It is God's word or promise, together with a sacred sign, the bread and the wine under which Christ's flesh and blood are truly present."¹⁶

The essence, then, of Luther's doctrine of the mass in this treatise is to

explain that we do not offer Christ as a sacrifice, but that He offers us, and we offer ourselves along with Christ. "And in this way it is permissible, yes, profitable, to call the mass a sacrifice; not on its own account, but because we offer ourselves as a sacrifice along with Christ. That is, we lay ourselves on Christ by a firm faith in His testament and do not otherwise appear before God with our prayer, praise, and sacrifice except through Christ and His mediation. Nor do we doubt that Christ is our priest or minister in heaven before God. Such faith, truly, brings it to pass that Christ takes up our cause, presents us in our prayer and praise, and also offers Himself for us in heaven. If the mass were so understood and for this reason called a sacrifice, it would be well. Not that we offer the sacrament, but that by our praise, prayer, and sacrifice we move Him and give Him occasion to offer Himself for us in heaven and ourselves with Him."¹⁷

Clearly, Luther had gone far from the teaching of the church in this matter. Gone were all outer forms associated with the mass, though he did not wish "to displace or discard such additions." Gone was the dogma of transubstantiation, though he did not openly reject it. Rejected fully was the important Roman doctrine of the sacrifice of the mass, and in its place we meet the important Luther doctrine of the believer's dependence on Christ as his mediator, minister, and priest before God. This each believer does by his faith, and thereby each and all are "equally spiritual priests before God." Luther was actually propounding his doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers. "All Christian men are priests, all women priestesses," he said, "be they young or old, master or servant, mistress or maid, learned or unlearned."¹⁸

Finally Luther, true to his calling to preach, insisted that the mass was instituted "to preach and praise Christ and to glorify His sufferings and all His grace and goodness," so that believers may be moved to love Him and believe Him. "And had there been no preaching, Christ would never have instituted the mass. He is more concerned about the word than about the sign. . . . What is the whole gospel but an explanation of this testament? Christ has gathered up the whole gospel in a short summary with the words of this testament or sacrament. For the gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God's grace and of the forgiveness of all sins, granted us through the sufferings of Christ."¹⁹

On this lofty note he closed a capital piece of writing.

Three months had scarcely passed before Luther's third work, dealing with the Roman sacramental system, appeared. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, published on October 6, 1520,²⁰ is a massive attack on the seven

sacraments of the church. Almost half of the book is devoted to two sacraments, baptism and Lord's Supper, and of these two the latter receives the larger treatment.

Luther quoted freely from his earlier treatments on the subject. He now asserted that the worst tyranny of the papacy centers in the Lord's Supper, which therefore received his chief attention. The sacrament, he insisted, is held in a threefold papal captivity, which lies in the withholding of the cup from the laity, the doctrine of transubstantiation, and the sacrifice of the mass. Step by step, with fine dialectic and great use of Biblical proof, he freed it from the tyranny of papal interpretations.

Hitherto he had thought that a general council might decide to give the sacrament to the laity in both kinds. But in advancing that view he had not concerned himself with the question of "whether the pope was right or wrong." Now he examined the passages in the Gospels and Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11 on the Lord's Supper, and found the universality of both kinds but especially that of the cup, of which Christ said, "Drink of it, all of you." (Matthew 26:27). This statement conquered him, and he called it "irrefutable." His opponents argued that the church had ordained that the cup be withheld. Not so, retorted Luther, "but the tyrants of the churches without the consent of the church, which is the people of God," have done it. He took up the case of John Huss and the Bohemians, who on this question had been condemned as heretics. But they had taken their stand only upon the Gospels. "It is you Romans," Luther proclaimed, "who are the heretics and godless schismatics, for you presume upon your figments alone against the clear Scriptures of God. Wash yourself of that, men!"²¹

Luther preferred still that the question be settled by a general council, because he did not want "both kinds to be seized upon by force." But our Christian liberty must be restored to us "out of the Roman tyrant," he reasoned, so that everyone is free "to seek and receive this sacrament, just as he is free to receive baptism." Christian liberty, so utterly lost, can be restored only in this way.

In his discussion of the second captivity of this sacrament, which centers in the doctrine of transubstantiation, Luther told how he came to hold his doctrine of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), greatest of medieval scholastic theologians, taught that in transubstantiation the "substance" of the bread and wine was changed into the "substance" of Christ's body and blood, while only the "accidents" of the bread and wine (that is, shape, color, and taste) remained.

Pierre d'Ailly (1350-1420), another important theologian, in one of his works observed that it could be much more probable and would require fewer superfluous miracles to hold that real bread and real wine, and not merely their accidents, are present on the altar, if only the church had not decreed otherwise. Luther found this comment by Pierre d'Ailly and was much disturbed by it; but "after floating in a sea of doubt," as he puts it, he found test for his conscience in d'Ailly's view, namely, "that it is real bread and real wine, in which Christ's real flesh and real blood are present in no other way and to no less a degree than the others assert them to be under their accidents."²²

Luther said also that he was aided in arriving at his view by his doubt in Aquinas's use of Aristotle's philosophy in establishing the doctrine of transubstantiation. He therefore rejected the doctrine as a "figment of the human mind, for it rests neither on the Scriptures nor on reason."²³ To be sure, reason finds both the Roman view of transubstantiation and Luther's view of the real presence, difficult to understand. He settled the problem by appealing to faith. "For my part," he said, "if I cannot fathom how the bread is the body of Christ, yet I will take my reason captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), and clinging simply to His words, firmly believe not only that the body of Christ is in the bread, but that the bread is the body of Christ."²⁴

The third captivity of the Lord's Supper "is by far the most wicked abuse of all." It is firmly held by the church, said Luther, that the mass is a good work and a sacrifice. This has turned the sacrament into "mere merchandise, a market, and a profit-making business." Brotherhoods, intercessions, anniversaries, memorial days, and the like set up their wares in the church and sell, trade, or barter. Priests and monks depend on these nefarious practices for their entire livelihood.

Luther proceeded to strip the mass of the many accretions added to the plain simple words of Christ through preceding centuries. The only worthy preparation and proper observance of the Holy Supper is faith, "the faith by which we believe in the mass, that is in the divine promise" that forgiveness of sins is given all who believe "that His body is given and His blood poured out for them." In history, maintained Luther, God has always dealt with His saints through a promise, accompanied by some "sign as a memorial or remembrance of the promise." Thus to His promise to Noah never to destroy the earth again by a flood, He added His bow in the clouds; to Abraham He promised a great inheritance and gave him circumcision as a mark of his justification by faith.

"So in the mass also," Luther concluded, "the foremost promise of all, He adds as a memorial sign of such a great promise His own blood in the bread and wine, when He says: 'Do this in remembrance of Me' (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25). And so in baptism, to the words of promise He adds the sign of immersion in water. We may learn from this that in every promise of God two things are presented to us, the word and the sign, so that we are to understand the word to be the testament, but the sign to be the sacrament. Thus, in the mass, the word of Christ is the testament, and the bread and wine are the sacrament."²⁵

In these words Luther fairly completed the traditional doctrine of the sacraments. They consist of the divine word of promise and the sign, or the testament and the sacrament. Now, it is possible for a person to have and use the word or testament apart from the sign or sacrament. For, asserted Luther, it is possible to hold mass every hour in every day because "I can set the words of Christ before me and with them feed and strengthen my faith as often as I choose."²⁶

In these words he brings us to the spiritual participation of the sacraments which forms the most important part of his doctrine. A sacrament is given to feed and strengthen faith. Luther criticizes the theologians who do not teach faith but "babble of transubstantiation and endless metaphysical trivialities" and destroy the right understanding of word and sign together with faith as such, and so cause Christ's people to forget their God. "But your faith is fed only with the word of divine promise," and in the mass one must give heed above all to the word of promise and "esteem this word above everything else, trust in it supremely, and cling to it most firmly."²⁷

Luther is adamant on the subject of faith. "Where faith dies and the word of faith is silent, there," he says, "works and the prescribing of works immediately crowd into their place." This is how we have been carried away "as into a Babylonian captivity and despoiled of all our precious possessions." Our restoration demands a discarding of the foundation of sand on which we have based anniversaries, brotherhoods, and numberless other lucrative schemes. Our reclamation requires a return to personal faith, for "each one can receive personal benefit from the mass only by his own personal faith." Everyone must stand on his own feet and bear his own load wherever a divine promise or testament is involved.²⁸

Luther's polemic on the Roman mass in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* gives us not only his opposition to the official doctrine of the church but also his own completed theological views on the Lord's Supper. All of his writings on the subject after 1520 served to elucidate mooted points in

his doctrine, or elaborate his views further as he built them into an important part of the service he prepared for the evangelical church in Germany, or ward off attacks on his doctrine by others than his own followers.

His first task was to keep his own followers from going to extremes in applying his views on purifying the administration of the sacrament in the university town of Wittenberg. The Diet of Worms in 1521 outlawed him and occasioned the necessity of his being hidden away and supposedly silenced for a time in the castle of Wartburg. Here he pondered his future reforms and soon informed his colleague, Melanchthon, at the university that he had contemplated changes in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.²⁹

However, his absence from Wittenberg gave his friends there opportunity to introduce various reforms. Gabriel Zwilling, Augustinian monk, and Andreas Karlstadt, professor of theology, began an ambitious program to stop private masses, to offer the Lord's Supper in both kinds, and to eliminate all traces of the mass as a sacrifice. These changes caused unrest, which grew as other radical ideas appeared and were endorsed by Karlstadt.

Luther reacted to the situation in *The Misuse of the Mass*, which he published early in 1522 in both Latin and German.³⁰ He repeated many of his earlier charges against the Roman Church with added emphasis and angry polemic. He rejected the whole priesthood of the church and condemned it as "nothing else than camouflages of the devil and accursed idols." Even their office of preaching he saw as an invention to deceive. The Holy Scriptures know of only one office of preaching God's Word, "and this office is common to all Christians, so that each person may speak, preach, and judge, and all the rest are obliged to listen."³¹ The devil, he said, had set up and exalted all other priests, for there is really only one single priest, Christ, who "sacrificed Himself for us and all of us with Him."

As for the papal bishops, Luther charged, they are "monstrous abominations of the world" calling themselves bishops. True "Christian bishops are honorable, married, mature, good men, learned in the word of truth, many in a single city, who are chosen by the neighboring bishops, or by their own people."³²

The sacrifice of the mass, Luther asserted, is an abomination, invented by popes and theological charlatans to destroy the Christian priesthood and to create a false sacrament of the altar. In this process of falsification the "pope and his Gomorrah" have altered the Ten Commandments until they have completely lost their divine interest and have been displaced by the Ten Commandments of the pope. By this we know that the "pope is the true, genuine, final antichrist, of whom the entire Scriptures speak."³³

In closing his bitter treatise Luther said he wanted to comfort and strengthen his fellow Augustinians in Wittenberg in their actions, for unless they were "a theatrical spectacle to God, angels, and men," they were not yet "true Christians." His brothers scarcely needed his comfort. Led by the monk Gabriel Zwilling, a band of them, on January 11, 1522, destroyed all the altars, except one, in the convent and cast out the images. Soon the populace invaded the parish church, burning the images and pictures. Revolution threatened Wittenberg.

Luther did not hesitate. On March 1 he left Wartburg. Upon his return home he immediately preached eight sermons which restored order in the city. The main content of his sermons was published under the caption *Receiving Both Kinds in the Sacraments*.³⁴ This document added little to his doctrine of the sacrament except certain statements implying that the elements are not the essence of the sacrament, that only Christ's word of institution is the essence, and that this can be had in the use of either the bread or the wine alone.

This point he emphasized further in his next writing on the subject, *The Adoration of the Sacrament*.³⁵ Everything valuable in the sacrament depends on the words of Christ. Every Christian must know them and hold them fast, for they are words of life and salvation. "Language cannot express how great and mighty these words are"; indeed, they are the "sum and substance of the whole gospel," Luther reasoned; therefore a Christian should give more attention to them than to the sacrament or its emblems.³⁶ The reason for this emphasis is plain; the words of Christ are living, eternal, and all-powerful and bring to us everything of which they speak, namely, "Christ with His flesh and blood and everything that He is and has."³⁷ This cannot be doubted. Luther urged that one must "let go of reason and intellect; for they strive in vain to understand how flesh and blood can be present; and because they do not grasp it, they refuse to believe it."³⁸

Here we have come again upon the most important part of Luther's doctrine of the Lord's Supper—the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. Some of his finest and most exalted writing was on this subject. He extolled it and elaborated upon it in lyric strains, and later he defended his view with all his dialectic skill and unreserved attack.

In the autumn of 1526 Luther's long dispute with the Swiss reformers over the Lord's Supper opened. Luther's treatise, commonly quoted as *Against the Fanatics*,³⁹ was a message in three sermons to his congregation on the occasion of the introduction of the German mass in Wittenberg at the Easter

service in 1526. Two of these sermons dealt with the views of the Swiss theologians on the subject of the Lord's Supper. They held that it is not fitting for Christ's body and blood to be in the bread and the wine, and further, not necessary. Luther readily admitted that since the resurrection Christ's presence anywhere other than in heaven on the right hand of the Father, is a mystery; but as soon as Christ says, "This is My body," He is present "through the word and the power of the Holy Spirit. If the word is not there, it is mere bread; but as soon as the words are added they bring with them that of which they speak."⁴⁰ Christ is the Word and through "the word He puts Himself into the bread also." We hold by faith that Christ enters the heart and dwells in the soul, Luther insisted, and this is truly a greater miracle than that He is present in the bread. "Indeed, it is for the sake of faith that He uses that very bread or sacrament. But if we wanted to follow after and think of God with our reason, we should have to say of faith, too, that no man is able to believe. For God is too far beyond all reason."⁴¹

Thus, Luther disposed of the objection that Christ's real presence in the sacrament is not fitting, that is, not in accord with reason. He just turned the argument of the Swiss about and said, "God's Word is true, therefore your notions must be false." It must needs be unreasonable to all who think it so, that is, to all who think that the Word must be wrong and their views valid.

To such as said that Christ's real presence was not necessary, Luther replied, "What is that to me?" If God says that it is necessary, all argument must end. And when Christ says: "Take eat, this is My body, etc., " Luther insisted that he must believe those words as "firmly as he must believe all the words of Christ." Here one must close mouth, eyes, and all the senses and say: "Lord, You know better than I."⁴²

Having disposed of his opponents' argument of fitness and non-necessity, Luther told his congregation of the deeper meaning of the sacrament. It is given for the Christians in the congregation alone and they must not use it as a good work. None must say: "This I have done," but every partaker of it must believe, not only that Christ is present with His body and blood, but also that He is given to each individual for the forgiveness of sins. This is the true treasure procured in the sacrament so that "we may be saved, redeemed from death and hell,"⁴³ the first principle of Christian doctrine.

The second principle is love. The partaker is given the redeeming Christ that he in turn may give himself "with might and main" for his neighbor. Thus the obligation of the Christian to his community is made a part of the "joyous feast" of the Lord's Supper. Luther called the sacrament "a taskmaster by which we order our lives and learn as long as we live." Then he added,

"Whoever knows this and lives accordingly is holy, and has not much more to learn, nor will he find anything more in the whole Bible."⁴⁴

Such was Luther's message to his own congregation on the meaning of the Lord's Supper on what turned out to be the eve of his great battle with all who differed from his views. If we compare his three sermons in 1526 with his treatment of the same theme in *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ*, written in 1519,⁴⁵ we find no change in the basic concept of the meaning of the sacrament. In his mind the sacrament meant a deep and complete fellowship between Christ and the participants who firmly believe that Christ meets them in His true body and blood, just as Christ did in 1526 and would do until the last day.

The great declarations on the Lord's Supper that came from Luther's pen, first in his *This Is My Body*, 1527, and second in his *Concerning Christ's Supper*, 1528,⁴⁶ need not occupy us long. Rather, they should be examined in connection with his liturgies, his small and large catechisms, and his other utterances as a constitutive churchman. On the subject under brief consideration here they bring little that is new, but they do constitute an integral part of the mighty battle for establishing the doctrine of the evangelical Christian church. Both Luther and Zwingli, as well as their supporters, were fighting for the doctrinal, not to mention the political, control of the new church.

In this great conflict of dialectic skill and bitter controversy over the Lord's Supper, Luther has been heartily criticized for his unyielding and irrational stand on the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. Actually, if he was to remain true to his profoundly deep convictions, which go to the heart of his doctrine of the Word of God and of Christ as the Word Incarnate, he could take no other stand.

Luther maintained that God is repletely, that is, supernaturally present in all places whole and entire, and fills all places, yet without being measured or circumscribed. This mode of existence belongs to God alone. It is "altogether incomprehensible, beyond our reason, and can be maintained only with faith in the Word."⁴⁷ Nothing less than the majesty, power, and glory of God is at stake in the Lord's Supper. God is "an inexpressible Being, above and beyond all that can be described and imagined,"⁴⁸ and when He through Christ says, "This is My body," it is no longer "ordinary bread in the oven, but a 'flesh-bread' or 'body-bread,' i.e., a bread which has become one sacramental substance, one with the body of Christ. Likewise, the cup . . . is no longer ordinary wine in the cellar but 'blood-wine' which has been united with the blood of Christ in one sacramental substance."⁴⁹

During the controversy, Zwingli charged that Luther came very close to

Romanism in his view of the Lord's Supper.

Luther replied: "This bothers me very little, for I have often enough asserted that I do not argue whether the wine remains wine or not. It is enough for me that Christ's blood is present; let it be with the wine as God wills. Sooner than have mere wine with the fanatics, I would agree with the pope that there is only blood."⁵⁰

These words indicate Luther's conviction that his doctrine of the Lord's Supper was divine in origin. They also indicate that he was nearer Romanism than he cared to admit when not under the pressure of controversy.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. LW 35, pp. 49-73.
2. The Council of Constance, 1417-1418, had made it canonical to withhold the wine from the laity.
3. That a drop of wine might fall to the floor.
4. LW 35, p. 50.
5. LW 35, pp. 51, 52.
6. LW 35, p. 52.
7. LW 35, p. 54.
8. LW 35, p. 60.
9. LW 35, p. 61.
10. LW 35, p. 50.
11. LW 35, p. 66.
12. LW 35, pp. 79-111.
13. LW 35, p. 81.
14. *Ibid.*
15. This is a composite of the several Scriptural accounts as given in the canon of the mass.
16. LW 35, p. 94.
17. LW 35, p. 99.
18. LW 35, p. 101.
19. LW 35, p. 106.
20. LW 36, pp. 11-126.
21. LW 36, p. 24.
22. LW 36, p. 29.
23. LW 36, p. 31.
24. LW 36, p. 34.
25. LW 36, p. 44.
26. *Ibid.*
27. LW 36, p. 45.
28. LW 36, p. 49.
29. LW 48, Letter No. 91.
30. LW 36, pp. 133-230.
31. LW 36, p. 152.
32. LW 36, p. 158.
33. LW 36, pp. 218, 219.
34. LW 36, pp. 237-267.
35. LW 36, pp. 275-305.

36. LW 36, p. 277.
37. LW 36, p. 278.
38. LW 36, p. 279.
39. LW 36, pp. 335-361.
40. LW 36, p. 341.
41. LW 36, p. 343.
42. LW 36, p. 345.
43. LW 36, p. 352.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. LW 37, pp. 5-150, 161-372.
47. LW 37, p. 216.
48. LW 37, p. 228.
49. LW 37, p. 303.
50. LW 37, p. 317.

Predestination

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t was no accident that Martin Luther called *The Bondage of the Will*¹ one of the two or three best works that he had ever written. This is his greatest piece of writing, indeed the greatest argument for the sovereignty of God to appear in the whole era of the Reformation, if not in all theological literature.

Luther understood that his argument over free will with the great Erasmus, which occasioned the book, was fundamental. He told Erasmus that he alone of all opponents had in his *Freedom of the Will* touched the main theme of theology. Whether or not a Christian's will has anything to do in matters of salvation is, he told Erasmus, "the hinge on which our discussion turns, the crucial issue between us." Therefore his aim in writing was "to investigate what ability 'free will' has, in what respect it is the subject of divine action, and how it stands related to the grace of God." These things we must know or "we shall know nothing whatever of Christianity, and shall be in worse case than any people on earth!" Anyone who denies or ridicules that statement should confess that "he is no Christian," indeed, "he should realize that he is the Christian's chief foe." For an individual to be ignorant of the "nature, extent, and limits" of what he "can and must do with reference to God" is to be equally ignorant and uncertain of the "nature, extent, and limits of what God can and will do" in him.

"Now if I am ignorant of God's works and power," Luther insisted, "I am ignorant of God Himself; and if I do not know God, I cannot worship, praise, give thanks, or serve Him, for I do not know how much I should attribute to myself and how much to Him."²

Luther chided Erasmus for not taking the subject under consideration seriously. "You call the knowledge of it irreligious, idle, and vain," said

Luther, pointing out that even pagan poets understood that "all things stand fixed by law and immutable" and "fixed is the day of every man."³ This goes to prove that the "knowledge of predestination and of God's prescience has been left in the world no less certainly than the notion of the Godhead itself." Only such as desired to seem wise argued themselves out of it "till their hearts grew dark and they became fools and denied, or pretended not to know," what the poets and the common people held most certain and true.⁴

Not to believe, then, in the "necessary foreknowledge of God and the necessity of events," is to destroy utterly Christian faith and the promises of God. But without these the whole gospel falls to the ground completely, for the Christian's chief and only comfort in every adversity lies in knowing that God does not lie, but brings all things to pass immutably, and that His will cannot be resisted, altered, or impeded.⁵

Luther closed this part of his argument with a stern admonition to Erasmus: "Let me tell you, therefore—and I beg you to let this sink deep into your mind—I hold that a solemn and vital truth, of eternal consequence, is at stake in this discussion; one so crucial and fundamental that it ought to be maintained and defended even at the cost of life, though as a result the whole world should be, not just thrown into turmoil and uproar, but shattered in chaos and reduced to nothingness. If you do not grasp that, if it leaves you unmoved, then mind your own business, and leave those to grasp it and be moved by it to whom it is given of God!"⁶

In such strong language Luther gives us an insight into the importance he attached to his doctrine of predestination. Everything he taught, the whole range of his theology from eternity to eternity, and the complete sweep of his thought, religious or secular, stands upon God's eternal decree of predestination. Nothing is or can be excluded. It is the framework into which he fastened all his doctrine and thinking. And his source of authority was the Word of God. God was Himself the source of the conflict, which will not cease till "all who oppose the Word have become as the mire of the streets."⁷ It is a cosmic conflict in which God and Satan are personally engaged, while on earth the "Word of God and the traditions of men fight each other in implacable opposition."⁸ The elect have the Word, indeed, "the Word of God came for their sake," while the ungodly have ever filled the earth "with war, deceit, violence, quarreling, and iniquity of every kind."

How did Luther come to hold such adamant views on this subject?

Not from Ockham, nor from Biel, nor yet from Augustine, though the Bishop of Hippo undoubtedly influenced Luther a good deal, as Luther's use

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of him in his early lectures clearly proves. But Luther built his structure of predestination only on the Word of God as he read and interpreted it against his own background as a monk and his terrible struggle with sin in all its manifestations. In the Bible and in his own experience he found the hopeless condition of man, accursed and alienated from God by original sin, without hope or comfort. In the Bible he found also a great and incomprehensible God, Creator and Upholder of the universe, just and terrible in His ways with sinners, and hidden from all human reason in His majesty and power. This was more than enough to frighten and damn all sinners, and he hated this God of unmitigated anger whose law condemned all to eternal death. Sin had made Luther crazy.

From this hopeless situation of despair he was rescued by the direct intervention, or, as he put it, "by the mercy of God." His speculations over predestination gave way to assurance of being one of God's elect. Staupitz had told him this would happen if he looked "at the wounds of Christ and at the blood of Christ that was shed for you. From these predestination will shine." Years later Luther told his students, "One must listen to the Son of God, who was sent into the flesh and appeared to destroy the work of the devil and to make you sure about predestination."⁹

In his long and torturous experience Luther also discovered God in a new and living way. He was now the God as revealed in Christ, a God of abundant mercy and love, who in all His majesty and power would save sinners entirely and solely by free and sovereign grace. To Luther He remained the God "who creates, effects, and preserves all things through His almighty power and right hand," who rules all in sovereign will, who is immeasurable and omnipotent, inscrutable and supernatural; but He is also very near His creation, for in Christ He is wholly and perfectly man, that is, God among men and of men; indeed, God and man now "belong together more intimately than body and soul."¹⁰

The God that Luther found, then, had lost none of His majesty and power. Rather He had gained in glory and mystery. In his battle with the Swiss over Christ's real presence in the Lord's Supper Luther argued mightily for the transcendent power and inexpressible mystery of God.

"Nothing is so small but God is still smaller," Luther argued; "nothing is so large but God is still larger; nothing is so short but God is still shorter; nothing is so long but God is still longer; nothing is so broad but God is still broader; nothing is so narrow but God is still narrower; and so on. He is an inexpressible Being, above and beyond all that can be described or imagined."¹¹

In this mighty, unsearchable, and hidden God, Luther lodged his doctrine of predestination completely. Professor Elert says that the predestination concept in Luther had only secondary significance and that faith to be truly faith must supplant or overcome the predestination concept.¹² If Elert, by his predestination concept, simply means that God determines some men for damnation and some for salvation, there may be a point in such an argument. But in Luther's doctrine of predestination the emphasis does not lie in the mere destiny of every individual. Luther placed the entire act of salvation in God's hand. God gives salvation or, better, Himself to His elect. They give God nothing and can give Him nothing. God gives faith for justification. Faith centers in God's mercy, not in anything that man conceives as a possible gift to God. Our salvation, wholly centered in God, depends on nothing we can contribute. If this is not so, Luther's whole doctrine of the sovereignty of God is destroyed.

Erasmus, in his attack on Luther, inferred that the Reformer could not be serious in his denial of free will. Luther answered: "This I beg of you, my good Erasmus—do not think that I maintain this cause at the prompting of passion rather than of judgment. I do not tolerate the insinuation that I am hypocrite enough to write one thing and believe another, nor have I been carried by the heat of battle (as you write of me) to the point where I now deny 'free will' for the first time, having previously ascribed something to it. I know that you will not be able to point to such an ascription anywhere in my books. . . . I have constantly asserted, up to this very hour, that 'free will' is a nonentity, a *thing* (I have used that word) *consisting of a name alone*. Conquered by truth and forced into the lists of the challenge of debate, this was my conviction; and thus I have written."¹³

So categorical a rejection of free will by Luther must not be carried to apply to everything a man must do in life. He has freedom in things about which God has given no command. He may eat or drink what he pleases, go where he wills, dress in white or black, marry or remain alone. "From his creation man has had free knowledge and power to rule and deal with those lesser than himself." But so far as the things of God are concerned he is not free; "he must obey the voice of God, or he will endure the sentence of death."¹⁴

That Luther's doctrine of predestination raises serious questions, there can be no doubt. It was to be discarded by his followers and played down by the experts. But of its importance in his thought there should be no question, and although God-centered theology is not in style today, we thus cannot escape reopening some of the problems inherent in the doctrine.

Luther himself dealt with most of them in his battle with Erasmus.

We note again that Luther placed the doctrine of predestination within the hidden will of God. This at once excludes debate on the doctrine. For man cannot inquire into the dreadful hidden will of God but can only reverently adore it, "for the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty" keeps it wholly "to Himself and forbids us to know it."¹⁵ God reveals Himself to us only in His Word.

We must make a distinction between God preached and God hidden, Luther insisted. "God does many things which He does not show us in His Word, and He wills many things which He does not in His Word show us that He wills. Thus, He does not will the death of a sinner—that is in His Word; but He wills it by His inscrutable will. At present, however, we must keep in view His Word and leave alone His inscrutable will; for it is by His Word, and not by His inscrutable will, that we must be guided."¹⁶

But in almost the same breath, Luther comes into a dilemma. If God does not will the death of a sinner, it must be laid to the charge of the sinner's own will if he perishes; therefore, the sinner must have a will in things pertaining to salvation.

Luther meets the problem squarely: "For He desires that all men should be saved, in that He comes to all by the word of salvation, and the fault is in the will which does not receive Him. . . . But why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out."¹⁷

So we have it that the sinner does have will in things pertaining to his salvation but he cannot use it. This is a fault in the sinner's will which he cannot avoid, but it is not lawful for him to ask why.

Luther returned often to the question of the hidden and the revealed will of God. He warned that "we not debate the secret will of Divine Majesty" but occupy ourselves "with God Incarnate, that is, with Jesus crucified" who was sent "to do, suffer, and offer to all men all that is necessary for salvation; albeit He offends many who, being abandoned or hardened by God's secret will of Majesty, do not receive Him." Then this statement follows: "It belongs to the same God-Incarnate to weep, lament, and groan over the perdition of the ungodly, though that will of Majesty purposely leaves and reprobates some to perish. Nor is it for us to ask why He does so, but to stand in awe of God, who can do, and wills to do, such things."¹⁸

This is hard theology. It presents God as working in a double capacity.

As God-Hidden, He determines the death of sinners by His inscrutable will. As God-Incarnate, He weeps, laments, and groans over the perdition of the ungodly, while the "will of Majesty purposely leaves and reprobates some to perish." We cannot ask why He does this; we can only stand in awe of God.

This reasoning comes unavoidably close to a contradiction. God-Hidden does what God-Incarnate cannot do. This aspect of Luther's doctrine seriously limits the work of Christ as Saviour. Nor does Luther himself hesitate to say so. In his lectures on Psalms, commenting on Psalm 110:1, he asserted that Christ "suffered for the elect but not for all men."¹⁹ This was repeated in his lectures on Romans where, commenting on Chapter 3:28, he said this: "Christ did not die for absolutely all, for He says: 'This is My blood which is shed for you' and 'for many'—He did not say: for all—to the remission of sins."²⁰

But if Christ's sacrifice on the cross is limited to the elect, it is obviously less inclusive than was Adam's sin, which involved the entire human family. Is not Satan, then, stronger in his kingdom of sin than Christ is in His kingdom of righteousness? And further, did not the hidden God in His eternal decree of predestination make unavoidable such a destiny among humans?

Zwingli, seeing this difficulty in his own doctrine of predestination, avoided it by admitting good pagans to salvation. God, he argued, cannot be limited in His plan to save, and so will have honorable pagans among the elect.

Luther would have none of this. Many men, he insisted, live good lives from beginning to end and do many good works "and yet they are not saved," while conversely, God "lets many commit great evils who are suddenly changed and saved." And as for Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 2:4, "God will have all men to be saved," Luther insisted that it "must be understood only with respect to the elect, as the apostle says in 2 Timothy 2:10, 'All for the elect.'"²¹

Likewise other noble, seemingly all-inclusive statements by Luther may be correctly understood only as applied to the elect. In his sermons on 1 John we find the following: "Therefore let everyone who has sin be summoned here, for He was made the expiation for the sins of the whole world. For all the godless have been put together and called, but they refuse to accept. Hence, it is stated in Isaiah 49:4, 'I have labored in vain.'²²

Luther clarified his meaning further in his sermons on 1 Peter: "St. Peter declares that they are chosen. How? Not by themselves but according to God's arrangement. For we shall not be able to bring ourselves to heaven or to create faith in ourselves. God will not admit all men to heaven. He will

count His own very exactly. Now the human doctrine of free will and of our own powers no longer amounts to anything. Our will is unimportant; God's will and choosing are decisive."²³ And in his comments on Romans 8:28-30, Luther gave the following interpretation: "He does not glorify all whom He justifies, and He does not justify all whom He calls, and He does not call all whom He has foreknown. Hence, the apostle fashions this sequence here only with respect to the predestined, namely, with respect to those 'whom He foreknew to be conformed.'"²⁴

The problem, then, is not with God's elect. They are "redeemed and sanctified through the precious blood of the Son of God." They are sure of their predestination "since all the prying and dangerous questions about God's secret counsels have been removed."²⁵ They are truly free, for they have heard the gospel and have believed it, have been baptized and called, and will be saved. They are saved not contingently but necessarily, "by sheer election and immutable will." They may be exposed "to as many rapacious graspings as there are evils," but by this method of salvation God wants to make plain that they are saved "by His immutable love," for this is "the inflexible and firm will of His predestination."²⁶

Luther had comfort for those who were overwhelmed by the fear that they are not among the elect. They should give thanks for such fear and rejoice in the knowledge that God cannot lie. They "should be bold, and unhesitatingly rely on God's truthfulness and accept His promise," and thus they will be saved and elected.²⁷

The problem lies with those who are reprobated. Does not God order them to do evil?

Luther said No. God does not order man to do evil. "No, one must rather say that He deserts him so that he cannot resist the devil, who now goes into action by the command and will of God."²⁸ However, while God does not order anyone to commit sin or to sin against his will, He does harden the reprobates and so gives them the "will voluntarily to be and to stay in sin and to love wickedness. Such are unavoidably in sin by the immutability of necessity but not of coaction."²⁹

But how does Satan enter the picture and how does he take command of the reprobates by the will of God?

Martin Luther did not for one moment give the devil any power or authority apart from God. He and ungodly men are alike "under the impulse of divine power," and God does not permit them to be idle but to will and act according to their nature. "Now, Satan and man, being fallen and abandoned by God, cannot will good—, but are ever turned in the direc-

tion of their own desires, so that they cannot but seek their own. . . . So that which we call the remnant of nature in the ungodly and in Satan, is no less subject to divine omnipotence and action than all the rest of God's creatures and works. Since God moves and works in all, He moves and works of necessity even in Satan and the ungodly."³⁰

But Satan and the ungodly, being reprobate, can do only evil works. So it comes about that God works evil in and by evil men, and evil deeds result, with Satan in command; but God cannot act evilly Himself but can use evil instruments, "which cannot escape the impulse and movement of His power." "God," says Luther, "cannot suspend His omnipotence on account of man's perversion, and the ungodly man cannot alter his perversion," but he sins and errs incessantly and inevitably.³¹

A case in hand is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The king of Egypt was corrupt by his very nature, and when God decided to deprive him of his kingdom "he galled and hardened him and brought bitterness to his heart," and so "allowed his own ungodly corruption, under Satan's sway, to blaze with anger, to swell with pride, to boil with rage, and to advance along the path of scornful recklessness." Thus Pharaoh "was swept along in the grip of Satan like a raging madman."³²

But if God thus moves evil wills, why does He not alter them?

This question touches the mystery of predestination, or, as Luther says, "the secrets of His majesty," and into these it is not for us to inquire but only to adore. "Nobody," declares Luther, "has the right to define the rule by which God punishes sins and rewards the good."³³ Further, he asserts: "God is He for whose will no cause or ground may be laid down as its rule and standard; for nothing is on a level with it or above it, but it is itself the rule for all things."³⁴ So by assuring us that "what takes place must be right, because He wills it so" Luther ends all debate on the subject. To reason otherwise, he maintains, would be to set another Creator above God.³⁵

Luther was fully aware that his doctrine of predestination was hard theology. It gives the greatest possible offense to common sense or natural reason, that God should "abandon, harden, and damn men." And men have stumbled at it down the ages. "And who would not stumble at it?" asked Luther. He answered: "I have stumbled at it myself more than once, down to the deepest pit of despair, so that I wished I had never been made a man. (That was before I knew how health-giving that despair was, and how close to grace.)"³⁶

So Luther had advice for anyone who fears and despairs that he is not of the elect: "Let him give thanks for such fear and let him rejoice over his

anxiety. He can be confident in the knowledge that God cannot lie who said: 'The sacrifice of God is a troubled,' i.e., a desperate, 'spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise (Ps. 51:17).' Now, he himself is aware of the fact that he is 'troubled.' He should be bold, therefore, and unhesitatingly rely on God's truthfulness and accept His promise and thus free himself from his former notion that God only frightens, and thus he will be saved and elected."³⁷

This is the same advice Staupitz gave the monk Luther with the assurance that predestination would shine forth in the wounds of Christ.

Luther was certain that he had personally experienced this to be a fact, and nothing could convince him that his doctrine was not divine, hence eternally safe and sound. In 1528 against Zwingli and the Sacramentarians he gave his full view of the subject of election:

"I herewith reject and condemn as sheer error all doctrines which glorify our free will, as diametrically contrary to the help and grace of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Outside of Christ death and sin are our masters, and the devil is our god and lord; and there is no power or ability, no cleverness or reason, with which we can prepare ourselves for righteousness and life or seek after it. On the contrary, we must remain the dupes and captives of sin and the property of the devil to do and to think what pleases them and what is contrary to God and His commandments."³⁸

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10. LW 37, p. 229.
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30. **Bondage**, p. 204.
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32. **Bondage**, pp. 205, 206, 207.
33. **Romans**, p. 34.
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Faith Alone

St is held generally that Luther's doctrine of righteousness by faith alone was his greatest contribution to Reformation theology. Here he actually rediscovered the essence of New Testament Christianity, which had become blurred or lost in the growth of institutional religion throughout the preceding centuries.

Luther, it is said, actually made a triple discovery. He anchored all his theology in three great principles: the Holy Scriptures alone, by grace alone, and through faith alone. The first *alone* involves the supreme authority of the infallible Word of God to the exclusion of all human authority in matters of salvation. The second *alone* asserts the boundless grace of God, who gave up His Son to an atoning death on the cross and thus offers salvation to all men. And the third *alone* involves the response of man to the grace offered him by God, that is, faith.

God's grace then, it is held, is universal. He wants all men saved. The reason this does not happen lies with man, who, because of lack of faith, does not receive God's grace. Faith is the instrument or means in man by which he appropriates God's grace to himself. Faith is a virtue which man uses to acquire grace, and faith is absolutely necessary for salvation.

Not all Luther students have interpreted his great doctrine of righteousness by faith in this way. More recently, translators of *The Bondage of the Will* have labeled it "hardly accurate." Luther centered his thinking, they assert, on the arguments found in Paul's teaching "that the sinner's entire salvation is by free and sovereign grace only."

To Luther the crucial issue was, as he stated it, "whether God is the author, not merely of justification but also of faith; whether, in the last analysis, Christianity is a religion of utter reliance on God for salvation and all things

necessary to it, or of self-reliance and self-effort. 'Justification by faith only' is a truth that needs interpretation. The principle of *sola fide* (faith alone) is not rightly understood till it is seen as anchored in the broader principle of *sola gratia* (grace alone). What is the source and status of faith? Is it the God-given means whereby the God-given justification is received, or is it a condition of justification which is left to man to fulfill? Is it a part of God's gift of salvation, or is it man's own contribution to salvation? Is our salvation wholly of God, or does it ultimately depend on something that we do for ourselves?"¹

These are important questions to which we must address ourselves. Luther raised all of them and more in his quest for certainty of salvation. In his struggle to find a gracious God he employed all means at his disposal—philosophy, scholasticism, sacraments, and good works—but to no avail. Later he asserted that theology, that is, the message of the Bible, provides the solution, but it is the theology of the gospel, the theology that explains the magnitude of sin and takes the cross as its point of departure where the wrath of God necessitates the sacrifice of His Son to establish the love of God as the supreme good in all the universe.

Clearly Luther's doctrine of faith goes back to his concept of sin. "The starting point is sin," said Luther, "from which we must constantly depart. The goal is righteousness, toward which we must move unceasingly."² In Adam's fall man "almost completely lost the original image of God." How very far he went from God is told us in considerable detail. "I am afraid that since the loss of this image through sin we cannot understand it to any extent. Memory, will, and mind we have indeed; but they are most depraved and most seriously weakened, yes, to put it more clearly, they are utterly leprous and unclean."³

Luther explained in great detail what he meant by the corruption of nature: "And so let those who wish to do so minimize original sin; it surely appears both from the sins it produces and from the punishments it incurs that it is by far the greatest sin. Consider lust alone. Is it not the most monstrous both in its passion and in its disgust? Moreover, what shall we say about hatred against God and about blasphemy? These are the outstanding moral failings which truly demonstrate that the image of God was lost."⁴

We might perhaps understand his doctrine of total depravity better if we compare it with his concept of Adam as created in the image of God. "Therefore the image of God, according to which Adam was created," Luther stated, "was something far more distinguished and excellent, since obviously no leprosy of sin adhered to his reason or to his will. Both his inner and his

outer sensations were all of the purest kind. His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquillity of mind, without any fear of death and without any anxiety.”⁵

This may suffice for Luther's view of original sin. In later years he generally called it unbelief or concupiscence, by which he meant all the evil desires that seek their fulfillment in the creature rather than in the Creator. Unbelief always finds its satisfaction in the works of the law and in earthly gods. Man must depend on something, which he calls his god. Even the sinner must have a god, and after the fall of Adam man could of himself worship only his own works and false gods. Luther said that this is a phenomenon which only eternity can clear up; we see it now only as sinful man reacts to the claims of God's laws.

Sin, therefore, in its nature is unbelief, disobedience to God's law, especially the first commandment. It results in separation from God, a spiritual death. Adam's transgression was followed by spiritual death, in which the law became a dead letter and a curse for man.

With this brief statement on the place of original sin in Luther's thought, we must turn more directly to the subject of righteousness by faith alone. Clearly the act of justification is an act of God and comes to man from without. God alone determines our salvation. Luther did indeed, as we have already noted, assign a good deal of free will to man in his everyday life. Here is one of his statements: “But in those matters that pertain to God and are above us no human being has a free will; he is indeed like clay in the hand of the potter, in a state of merely passive potentiality, not active potentiality. For there we do not choose, we do not do anything; but we are chosen, we are equipped, we are born again, we accept, as Isaiah says (64:8): ‘Thou art the Potter; we Thy clay.’”⁶

Observe how very specific Luther was in his doctrine of faith alone. We do not choose, we do not do anything, but we are chosen, we are equipped, we are born again, we accept. And the reason is that our original sin is incurable. Man has no free will; therefore, God gives man justification. Truly, man is justified by faith alone, but man's faith does not originate with man; it is God's gift to man. Man does not have it in him to originate or produce faith. God must do it for man.

Faith, then, is not something that man can offer God or give Him. It is not something that man can use to appease an angry God, or a God of judgment; on the contrary it is God's own work in and through man. Man does not seek to gain salvation through faith—that would be works. Faith

is not a physical condition or function in man's relationship to God. Nor is faith a passive experience. Luther called faith a "tremendous power," active in man and very real. It is God's work in man. It is God Himself who works in faith, who lives in faith and makes Himself known to man and conquers man. "God and faith belong together." Faith is God's working power in man; it is the means by which He enters into relationship with man.⁷

We have found Luther's doctrine of faith. But what about his doctrine of righteousness? The answer is not difficult. It is God-Incarnate. Christ is our righteousness.

But God does not give man the Christ generally depicted. He gives man the Christ of suffering, of desolation of spirit, and of despair. But this God-Incarnate is also the Christ of victory and triumph. It is the Christ who in His death descended to hell and tasted its terrors and returned its conqueror. This Christ, so debased and then so exalted, is in fact only revealing the character of the God-Creator. His life, death, and resurrection reveal the victory of the God of love over evil. Jesus shows man that God is a glowing furnace of love.

That love is for us; it justifies us, and so we become righteous. In a sermon preached in 1519 Luther said: "Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: "Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, His suffering and dying; mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, and suffered, and died as He did. . . . Therefore, everything that Christ has is ours, graciously bestowed on us unworthy men out of God's sheer mercy, although we have rather deserved wrath and condemnation, and hell also. . . . This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. On the contrary, he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as He. It is therefore impossible that sin should remain in him."⁸ This righteousness belongs to him who believes in Christ. Through faith alone the believer's sins become Christ's in whom he believes. "Therefore, sins cannot remain in the believer just as they cannot remain in Christ." In his great declaration called "The Freedom of a Christian Man," Luther said: "If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe you shall lack all things. God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing."⁹

In what may well be the greatest passage on faith that he ever penned Luther wrote: "Faith not only gives the soul enough for her to become like the divine Word, gracious, free, and blessed. It also unites the soul with

Christ, like a bride with the bridegroom, and from this marriage, Christ and the soul become one body, as St. Paul says (Eph. 5:30). Then the possessions of both are in common, whether fortune, misfortune, or anything else; so that what Christ has, also belongs to the believing soul, and what the soul has, will belong to Christ. If Christ has all good things, including blessedness, these will also belong to the soul. If the soul is full of trespasses and sins, these will belong to Christ. At this point a contest of happy exchanges takes place. Because Christ is God and man, and has never sinned, and because His sanctity is unconquerable, eternal, and almighty. He takes possession of the sins of the believing soul by virtue of her wedding ring, namely faith, and acts just as if He had committed those sins Himself. They are, of course, swallowed up and drowned in Him, for His unconquerable righteousness is stronger than any sin whatever. Thus the soul is cleansed from all her sins by virtue of her dowry, *i.e.*, for the sake of her faith. She is made free and unfettered, and endowed with the eternal righteousness of Christ, her bridegroom. Is not that a happy household, when Christ, the rich, noble, and good bridegroom, takes the poor, despised, wicked little harlot in marriage, sets her free from all evil, and decks her with all good things? It is not possible for her sins to damn her, for now they rest on Christ and are swallowed up in Him. In this way she has such a rich righteousness in her bridegroom that she can always withstand sins, though they indeed lie in wait for her.¹⁰

Luther comes upon the theme of righteousness and faith very often, and he presents it in such variations of speech as seemingly to exhaust even his own rich treasury of language. Faith is not only the soul's wedding ring uniting us and Christ in indissoluble marriage, it also is the key to the heart of God: "For faith leads you up and opens up the heart and will of God for you. There you see sheer, superabundant grace and love. That is exactly what it means 'to see God,' not with physical eyes, with which no one can see Him in this life, but with faith, which sees His fatherly, friendly heart, where there is no anger or displeasure. Anyone who regards Him as angry is not seeing Him correctly, but has pulled down a curtain and cover, more, a dark cloud over His face."¹¹

Or faith makes man a judge over all that man can think up and devise: "If I keep the conviction that only Christ is my Righteousness and Holiness, no monk will ever beguile me with his cowl, his rosary, or any of his other works or man-made baubles. Faith makes me a judge over every class and way of life that men can think up, and I can condemn anything claiming to show me something else that avails before God. If I neglect this treasure and let it slide in order to look for other ways to be pious, to reconcile God,

and to atone for sin, then I am a ready victim for all the various snares and traps of the devil, and have become his obedient servant."¹²

Faith not only brings man up to God; it also brings God down to man: "I am thankful for His unfathomable mercy, that He has in so fatherly a fashion come down to me, a lost creature, and that, without any merit on my part, unasked and unbidden, has offered Himself to me to be my God, to accept me, and to be my comfort, refuge, help, and strength in every time of trouble—all this in spite of the fact that we poor, blind mortals have sought other gods and would continue to do so if He did not deign to speak to us so openly and offer in our own human speech to be our God. Who can ever thank Him for this?"¹³

In discussing the subject of righteousness and faith Luther is fond of the sin-righteousness approach. In a letter to a fellow monk in 1516 he puts the problem thus: "Therefore, my dear friar, learn Christ and Him crucified. Learn to praise Him, and, despairing of yourself, say, 'Lord Jesus, You are my righteousness, just as I am Your sin. You have taken upon Yourself what is mine and have given to me what is Yours. You have taken upon Yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.' Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners. On this account He descended from heaven, where He dwelt among the righteous. Meditate on this love of His, and you will see His sweet consolation."¹⁴

In the foregoing paragraphs we have met Luther's views on the doctrine of righteousness by faith alone in its full development. In the letter just quoted Luther said that he was still fighting against the error of good works "without having conquered it yet." Years had passed since in the monastery in Erfurt he first raised the question, "How can I find a gracious God?" When he first raised it, he was deep in Romanism, and his question was really egocentric, anchored in the sacramental theology of Ockhamism. As long as he clung to it, he could not answer the question he had raised. Only when he began to go beyond the sacramental-legalistic aspect of the question into the problem of God's work in and through man, only when he discovered that God alone works all things by His sovereign omnipotence, did he begin to understand that the whole act of justification is not man's act but God's. No longer egocentric, Luther's question became theocentric.

This development in Luther's thinking is seen in his discovery of the concept of the "passive righteousness of God." In the "Preface" to his *Latin Works*, written in 1545, he used the expression in connection with his discovery of justification by faith. He said that by the mercy of God he began

to understand that the righteousness of God in Romans 1:17 is the "passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith," as in the Scripture, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."¹⁵

This was Luther's great discovery. He needed years to find the full import of Romans 1:17. We meet the statement the "passive righteousness of God" in his lectures on Psalms, but the essence of its meaning is not present. Luther tied it up with confession of sins or some act on the part of man, not with an act of God from without. It was in his lectures on Romans that he first identified the "passive righteousness of God" with the specific act, the outward act of God which the sinner accepts by faith. But, even though he connected the term "passive righteousness of God" as the gift of faith through Christ, he had not yet fully arrived at an understanding of Romans 1:17. His early question: "How can I find a gracious God?" that is, "How can I be sure of salvation?" implied certainty; and, as it applied to himself, Luther still did not answer the question. In the course of his comments on Romans 8:16 he broke with the humility concept and proclaimed boldly, "Whoever in full faith believes and trusts that he is the son of God, he is the son of God."¹⁶ Still he did not dare apply this to himself but rested his case with the statement that no one can be certain of salvation in this world.¹⁷

However, Luther's full insight into Romans 1:17 was not far away. In his commentary on the *Seven Penitential Psalms* (1517), we detect a different note. Humility is no longer the highest virtue. The sinner is to be bold and courageous. "Rise up and sing praises," Luther urged; "be of good cheer, like a man who shouts for joy. For the heart that is right with God and is not wrapped up in itself or in something other than God is founded on the eternal good and stands firm. Therefore it has an abundance out of which it can praise, glory, strut, and boast, as the apostle says: 'Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.'"¹⁸

We meet repeatedly the same feeling of victorious joy in what Luther did and said after this. There was no longer any hesitancy. Luther knew where his salvation was anchored. His theology was now the theology of the cross. The wounds of Christ, to which Staupitz pointed him long before, had now become saving wounds revealing God's mercy and power to save him, not through his good works but through an alien righteousness instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which He justifies by faith. We return to a quotation from Luther used earlier: "Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: 'Mine are Christ's living, doing, and speaking, His suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered, and died as He did.'"¹⁹

Martin Luther's Religious Thoughts

This is the great and precious gift which the blessed God and Father of mercies has granted us in Christ. It was promised long ago to Abraham. Isaiah saw it and wrote: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given." All of God's promises end in Christ our righteousness, and "through faith in Christ, therefore, Christ's righteousness becomes our righteousness and all He has becomes ours; rather, He Himself becomes ours. . . . This is an infinite righteousness, and one that swallows up all sins in a moment, for it is impossible that sin should exist in Christ. On the contrary, he who trusts in Christ exists in Christ; he is one with Christ, having the same righteousness as He. It is therefore impossible that sin should remain in him."²⁰

Luther called this righteousness primary because it is the source of all our "actual righteousness," and it is "given in place of the original righteousness lost in Adam." It is also an alien righteousness "instilled in us without our works by grace alone."²¹

When Luther spoke these words early in 1519 in a sermon on the *Two Kinds of Righteousness*,²² he had just broken through as Reformer. He knew where his power and authority were anchored.

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7. R. Bring, *Tro och Gärningar inom Luthers Theologi* (Helsinki, 1933), pages 25,
26. We have shortened the longer title of this important study by the Swedish scholar on the subject of faith and works in Luther's thought.
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11. LW 21, p. 37.
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15. LW 34, p. 337.
16. Romans, p. 234, Note 29.
17. See the penetrating study by A. Gyllenkrok, *Rechtsfertigung und Heiligung in der fruchten evangelischen Theologie Luthers* (Uppsala, 1952), pages 50-60.
18. LW 14, p. 154.
19. LW 31, p. 297.
20. LW 31, p. 298.
21. LW 31, p. 299.
22. LW 31, pp. 299-306.

Sanctification

N

n inquiry into any phase of Luther's doctrine of salvation must recognize that no aspect of the doctrine—righteousness, faith, love, works, sanctification, et cetera—is a separate act or phase of an event or experience which we call salvation, but salvation is one sole act of God. Luther took Paul's statement completely: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5:17, RSV.

Christian holiness, like everything else in salvation, comes, said Luther, "when the Holy Spirit gives people faith in Christ, that is, when he makes heart, soul, body, works, and ways of life new and writes God's commandments on the hearts of flesh and not on tables of stone."¹ The Holy Spirit, then, is the exclusive agent in sanctification. He makes the believer "a new shoot growing out of the vine, Christ," "a new creature with a different mind, heart, and thoughts."² He unites the believer and Christ so intimately that they become "one being," "one body," "one cake" with Him. The Christian can say: "Whoever twists my finger, does it to Christ; for I am Christ's littlest toe." And if I feed a Christian, Christ says it is done to Him, "for they have become one cake, one being."³

So it is by virtue of our incorporation into Christ as members of His body, or by our being ingrafted into Him as branches of the True Vine, that we become partakers of His holiness. "Whoever believes," said Luther, "that Christ sanctified Himself for us is sanctified." We are not sanctified by the Ten Commandments or works of love, although these are holy, as is everything else that is contained in God's Word. Still less can we be sanctified by works of our own devising, which God has not commanded. Nothing makes us truly holy but believing in Christ. And anyone who does believe in

Christ is holy, not in himself but in Christ, not with a holiness of his own but Christ's. In this way every Christian is a saint, and the church is the community of saints.⁴

Christian holiness is a very active and practical factor in life. In the great treatise *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), Luther dwelt upon the subject of Christian holiness. While he insisted that no Christian can attain to it by a mere keeping of the commandments, he asserted also that both tables of God's law are essential to holiness. The Holy Spirit imparts to the Christian the "true knowledge of God, according to the first table, so that those whom He enlightens with true faith can resist all heresies, overcome all false ideas and errors, and thus remain pure in faith in opposition to the devil."⁵ Observe that this is true holiness or sanctification and that it comes within the compass of the first table as the Holy Spirit writes it upon the heart of the Christian.

In like manner the Holy Spirit uses the second table to establish sanctification in the hearts of the saints. We quote: "He also sanctifies the Christians in the body and induces them willingly to obey parents and rulers, to conduct themselves peacefully and humbly, to be not wrathful, or malicious, but patient, friendly, obliging, brotherly, and loving, not unchaste, not adulterous or lewd, but chaste and pure with wife, child, and servant, or without wife and child. And so on: they do not steal, are not usurious, avaricious, do not defraud, etc., but work honorably, support themselves honestly, lend willingly, and give and help wherever they can. Thus they do not lie, deceive, and backbite, but are kind, truthful, faithful, and trustworthy, and do whatever else the commandments of God prescribe. That is the work of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies and also awakens the body to such a new life until it is perfected in the life to come. This is what is called 'Christian holiness.'"⁶

To charge Luther, as has been done, with neglect in not developing an adequate theology on the subject of sanctification seems entirely to miss his central thought that the subject is altogether a part of his doctrine of salvation. No other theologian has spoken better or included more in his concept of holiness than did Luther, for he involved in the subject all that a Christian can and must perform under the Holy Spirit. He pictured an outgoing life and included the entire community. Sanctification is righteousness by faith in everyday witnessing and action for God wherever the Christian might be. "True holiness, the holier it is," said Luther, "the nearer it draws to sinners."

He was fully aware that Christian holiness is a demanding life. But there must always be such people on earth, though their number be small, even "two or three, or only children." Few of them are old. The rest need not

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count themselves as Christians, and they should not babble "about the forgiveness of sins and the grace of Christ, as though they were Christians—like the Antinomians do."⁷

Whether few or many, God's saints are those alone "whom God has sanctified without any of their works or cooperation whatsoever, by reason of the fact that they are baptized in Christ's name, sprinkled and washed clean with His blood, and endowed and adorned with His dear Word and gifts of the Holy Spirit." This none has or can engender but must receive from Christ as pure grace. Anyone who seeks after another holiness "is a stench and abomination to the Lord," because he denies the "bath of the blood of the innocent Lamb," which alone can make one holy and clean.⁸

Here we have reached another point in Luther's doctrine of sanctification. We have seen that he believed holiness to be alien to man and as coming to him from without. Christ is its source; He provides it for us in His sacrifice as Priest and Victim, and He makes it available to us in His Word and sacraments by the Holy Spirit. This is an important point in Luther's teaching. "Although I am a miserable sinner, yet Christ is holy with His baptism, Word, sacraments, and Holy Spirit. That is the real holiness given us by God."⁹

With these words Luther placed sanctification within the offices of the church. He was most specific on the subject. The Holy Spirit commences "sanctification on earth and daily increases it by means of two things: the Christian church and the forgiveness of sins."¹⁰

Luther was a staunch churchman to whose view the church was a visible, divinely organized institution with definite functions to perform. It had a great treasury of divine gifts; it was a kingdom of grace and pardon. God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are in the Christian church. The gospel, baptism, and the Holy Supper are there, in which forgiveness of sins is offered and received. "Outside this Christian church," he said, "there is no salvation or forgiveness of sins but everlasting death and damnation." There may be a magnificent appearance of holiness and many good works, but they are all in vain.¹¹

From our study so far of Luther's views on sanctification, it should be clear that he did emphasize it in his thought. True to his doctrine of salvation, he placed sanctification within the framework of the sovereignty of God, who by one great act of justifying righteousness gives sinners all that is necessary for eternal salvation, including sanctification. And God puts the entire process of saving lost man within the true Christian church. Here is where man is holy and where he learns patience, humility, gentleness,

and endurance unto sanctification.

When in man's life does this process of holiness begin and when does it end? Did Luther understand that sanctification is progressive and the result, perhaps, of a long Christian experience?

The answer to these questions takes us back to the church which has the sacred offices under the control of the Holy Spirit. It is in the church that the Spirit carries on a sanctifying work by the sacred offices which God has placed in the church. It is in the church, Luther taught, that the Holy Spirit sanctifies the Christians daily "through the forgiveness of sin acquired for them by Christ" and "through the abolition, the purging, and the mortification of sins, on the basis of which they are called a holy people." In this manner the Holy Spirit produces on earth a holy Christian people "in whom Christ lives, works, and rules, *per redemtionem*, 'through grace and the remission of sin,' and the Holy Spirit, *per vivificationem et sanctificationem*, 'through daily purging of sin and renewal of life,' so that we do not remain in sin but are enabled and obliged to lead a new life, abounding in all kinds of good works, as the Ten Commandments or the two tables of Moses' law command."¹²

Luther marshalled all the services, usages, and practices of the holy Christian church in the work of sanctification. The Word of God, the sacraments, prayers, singing, the creed, the Ten Commandments, and the catechism are all holy, precious possessions "whereby the Holy Spirit sanctifies the holy people of Christ."¹³ For example: "We need the Decalogue not only to apprise us of our lawful obligations, but we also need it to discern how far the Holy Spirit has advanced us in His work of sanctification and by how much we still fall short of the goal, lest we become secure and imagine that we have now done all that is required. Thus we must constantly grow in sanctification and always become new creatures in Christ. This means 'grow' and 'do so more and more.'"¹⁴

Sanctification, then, is development and a constantly progressing justification which manifests itself in growth of faith. It means that the Spirit of Christ is gaining supremacy over the flesh, the new man over the old man. Christian life consists in motion, movement, a daily dying and rising. There is no rest. The character of our present existence is imperfectness. Sanctification is the transition from the existence in this world to that existence where eternal peace prevails. The instruments and offices in the church that aid us are sacred and holy under the Holy Spirit, but we are sinners even with these aids present in the church.

"We are," said Luther, "half pure, half holy in that the Holy Spirit always

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works in us through the Word and daily gives us forgiveness until that life where there is no more forgiveness, since all persons are clean, pure, holy, and full of sanctity and forgiveness."¹⁵

If we were to ask at what points or with what particular acts the work of sanctification begins and ends, Luther would answer, "Sanctification begins with baptism and ends with death." These are the two points between which the process of sanctification must move. The movement may at one moment be quiet, at another stormy. It is a constant seeking and desiring in word and deed. Every righteous act is preparatory for the next righteous step forward. Every battle won prepares for the next struggle. "To progress is nothing else than to begin anew," said Luther.¹⁶

In his lectures on the Psalms as well as on Romans, Luther stated the whole content of his subject in two short sentences. "The starting point," he said, "is sin, from which we must constantly depart. The goal is righteousness, toward which we must move unceasingly."¹⁷ He applied the same thought to the process of sanctification. The starting point is sin, which is our entire self at any one moment; the point to which we are moving is Christ's righteousness, which is Christ Himself.

The thought that sanctification grows in us as unrighteousness diminishes was stated many times and in varying terms by Luther. In a sermon in 1516 he set the concept into the framework of the growth of faith. As our faith grows, our desire for this world decreases and we set our desires on things invisible. And the more we desire the invisible, the more our desire for the visible lessens until we let go of them completely and thus arrive at a perfect faith.¹⁸

The same thought meets us in a sermon from 1519. It is thought by some that Luther had discovered the full meaning of Romans 1:17 not long before he preached this particular sermon. However that may be, he surely included his whole doctrine of justification and sanctification in one short statement:

"Therefore, this alien righteousness, instilled in us without our works by grace alone—while the Father, to be sure, inwardly draws us to Christ—is set opposite original sin, likewise alien, which we acquire without our works by birth alone. Christ daily drives out the old Adam more and more in accordance with the extent to which faith and knowledge of Christ grow. For alien righteousness is not instilled all at once, but it begins, makes progress, and is finally perfected at the end through death."¹⁹

This is also an accurate picture of Luther's view of salvation. According to Luther's doctrine, salvation is entirely alien to man. Righteousness, justification, faith, and sanctification all belong together; they come to us from

without, that is, from God. Even our sin, so devastating and terrible in its result, is alien, for we acquired it by birth alone without our works.

At this point we might close our treatment of Luther's doctrine of sanctification. However, there is another angle to his doctrine of salvation that can and should detain us for consideration. It is very dear to Luther, but it also involved him in seeming paradoxes and uncertainties. It has been called his doctrine of *simul*, a Latin word meaning "also," or "at the same time," or "simultaneous."

In Luther's works the concept appears in such terms as "flesh and spirit," "sinner and just," "wholly sinner and wholly righteous," "half sinner and half Christian." All these expressions and more seem at times baffling.

So Luther could say that "every moment the devil is against us so that he may make us half-Christians." We are Christians in name only, not in fact.²⁰ Such statements would seem to make Luther's concept of the Christian man a wish or an ideal rather than a fact. He may have had such thoughts when he called a truly Christian man "a very rare bird" and the like.

But he cleared up the problem in various statements. In his comments on Psalm 119:25 he dealt with this problem. None is so perfect, he argued, that he cannot reach a higher perfection, none so glorified that he cannot become more glorified, or so pure that he cannot be purer, or so humble that he cannot be more humble, and so on in all the virtues. The earthly sticks to each of us. In everyone there remains something secular so that none is wholly spiritual; something of the old man so that none is wholly new; of the earth, the world, and the devil so that none is wholly soul, wholly heavenly, wholly Christ's, wholly God's. Man has only begun the new life; he needs ever more and more light and growth that he may perfect what he has begun. Only one who has begun a spiritual life can know how very much of the desires of the flesh and the world remains in him. The real obstacles to spiritual progress, then, are the remains of the flesh, or the sins that cling to us throughout life. "If we consider ourselves diligently we will always find in ourselves not a few remains of the flesh."²¹

But Luther also spoke of "wholly righteous or wholly sinner," only to resolve the paradox quickly. "Insofar as I am perfect, I adhere fully to Thy testimonies; insofar as I am imperfect and still carnal, my soul clings to things earthly."²²

Thus Luther explained that from one point of view he was still imperfect, still carnal, and neither spiritual nor a new man; on the other hand, he was perfect and spiritual because Christ was his solid Rock and wholly spiritual, in whom Luther rested and in whom we as well are spiritual and perfect.

A competent Luther scholar interprets the Reformer's view accurately in these terms: "The Christian is wholly righteous in Christ, in the sense that Christ's righteousness is imputed to him, or he is accounted righteous for Christ's sake, and his own sinfulness is not imputed to him but freely and unreservedly forgiven. Yet he is wholly sinful in himself, inasmuch as the original sin remaining in him, even though it does not reign, affects every part of his being and infects everything that he does. At the same time, it can rightly be said that he is in fact regenerated by the Holy Spirit, though not yet completely so. There is a real measure of new life in him, as well as the sin that has still to be eradicated."²³

This seems to exhaust the problem, but not quite. Luther's favorite terms in dealing with this subject were "flesh" and "spirit." Now Luther surely held that man was, at one and the same time, half flesh and half spirit, or part flesh and part spirit, but he also used the terms "flesh" and "spirit" to denote the totality and not a part of man. In this usage, man, in the process of sanctification, is totally "spirit," that is he becomes "spirit" or "spiritual," and "flesh" disappears. Nevertheless, he is at one and the same time in belief and in unbelief, and what he does in unbelief he does as a complete psycho-physical being. However, since he, even while unbelief attacks him, resists it in faith, only a part of his unbelief can become active. Said Luther: "For one and the same person is spirit and flesh; thus what the flesh does the whole man is said to do. And yet what resists is not the whole man but is rightly called a part of him. Both then are true: it is he that acts and yet is not he."²⁴

From this statement it is clear that Luther used the terms "spirit" and "flesh" to mean psychological functions; he equated these with two other terms, namely, "faith" and "concupiscence." He used these terms without clearly differentiating, and so they became paradoxical. On the one hand, the terms implied part concepts; on the other, they implied totality concepts.

We are tempted to linger on this point, since it was important to Luther but not always clear. Here is a basic statement on the matter: "If we examine ourselves carefully, we shall always find within ourselves at least some remnants of the flesh, by virtue of which, preoccupied with ourselves, we resist the good and incline toward evil."²⁵

Luther went on to say that if such remains of sin were not present in us, we would be ready for translation, or, as he put it, "our souls would fly to God." The fact that this does not happen is proof that the soul is "still caught in the body until set free by the grace of God," which can happen only in death.²⁶

Scholars have recognized the difficulty in this Luther statement and have analyzed it critically. It has been suggested that Luther was really presenting not less than four "I" concepts in the statements just quoted. The four "I" concepts can be conveniently made into two groups with two in each. Again the first two can be made into one "I," and this one "I" includes Luther's statements that made man at one and the same time partly spirit. This "I" denotes a tendency toward evil, but since it recognizes this tendency, it cannot be called as identical with evil. The second group of two "I's" is identical with the Luther terms "preoccupied with ourselves" and "proven to evil"; and so these two "I's" are identical with Luther's term that man is "bent in upon himself," that is, man's constant aim is to find all good in himself, to consult only himself, in short, to be his own god.²⁷

And so we find that Luther could say with perfect consistency, as he referred to the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37) who poured oil and wine on the wounded man: "The sick man of whom we are speaking is one and the same man who is weak and in process of being healed. Insofar as he is healthy, he desires the good, but insofar as he is weak, he cannot help yielding to his weakness even though he does not want to."²⁸

Just as there were two opposite entities in the sick man in Luke's Gospel, so in the Christian man "the flesh is a basic weakness or wound of the whole man which grace has only begun to heal in his reason or spirit." Man is in this life both just and sinner. The Christian life is one of constant struggle, but the believer has nothing to fear except his own ego, for Christ is his Samaritan who constantly is attending him in His inn, the church, and will complete the cure when the Christian puts on immortality. But, admonished Luther: "Let us therefore walk with fear so that we may with strong faith keep the richness of divine grace and rejoice in His mercy now and forever. Amen."²⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. LW 41, p. 145.
2. WA 45, p. 667.
3. WA 28, p. 187.
4. WA 30, p. 189.
5. LW 41, p. 146.
6. *Ibid.*
7. LW 41, p. 247.
8. LW 41, pp. 247, 248.
9. WA 45, p. 616.
10. WA 30, I, p. 191.
11. LW 37, p. 368.
12. LW 41, pp. 143, 144.

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13. LW 41, p. 164.
14. LW 41, p. 166.
15. WA 30, I, p. 191.
16. WA 56, p. 486.
17. WA 4, p. 364.
18. WA 1, p. 102.
19. LW 31, p. 299.
20. WA 3, p. 417.
21. WA 4, p. 320.
22. *Ibid.*
23. P. S. Watson, "Luther and Sanctification," in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 30 (1965), p. 255.
24. Romans, p. 204.
25. Romans, p. 112.
26. *Ibid.*
27. A. Gyllenkrok, *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung in der frühen evangelischen Theologie Luthers* (Uppsala Universitets Arsskrift, 1952, No. 2), pages 87, 88.
28. Romans, p. 213.
29. *Ibid.*

Reason

Until recently Luther's doctrine of reason has failed to receive adequate attention. During his career Luther made numerous sharply disparaging statements about the inefficiency of reason when used to formulate or to establish divine truths, and some critics have seized upon these harsh attacks to discredit his work in its totality. He was, some insist, definitely anti-intellectual, indeed, lacking all the qualities that make men truly great.¹

This approach to the Reformer is changing. Contemporary scholarship does not hesitate to emphasize his many outbursts and his low billingsgate on various themes and personalities, but it also seeks to set his thought within a framework of theology where all his doctrines are related to one another to form a systematic whole.

For Luther, contrary to widely held opinions, did not churn out a mass of unrelated writings to clarify his views on doctrinal issues and social problems that arose so often during his career. His many occasional writings, when examined as a whole, reveal a remarkable doctrinal and systematic unity. His volcanic explosions and many exaggerations must not be confused with his deep sense of theological order and system. For Luther was first, last, and all the time a theologian, and the Bible alone was the source book for his study. To him the Bible was a mighty forest in which he had personally shaken every tree, as he said. And this was not idle boasting.

So we must turn to the Bible and Luther's use of it for his doctrine of reason. So far in dealing with various aspects of his doctrine of salvation we have found that he looked upon salvation, from beginning to end, as one great gift of God to the elect. They cannot give anything to God; He gives all to them freely and abundantly.

His doctrine of reason lies in a somewhat different category. Reason was part of the physical equipment which God placed in Adam in the act of creating man. It antedates sin and all of God's gifts of salvation. Luther recognized this fact. In the lectures on the opening chapter of Genesis he described at length the first man as he came forth from God's creative act. Adam was made in the image of God. In things purely physical or animal he was similar to the beasts. But in addition to his physical life he had "an immortal one," though this was not yet clearly revealed, "but only in hope."² This was the image of God in Adam. It was something "far more distinguished and excellent" than the physical life. "His intellect was the clearest, his memory was the best, and his will was the most straightforward—all in the most beautiful tranquillity of mind."³ Luther called Adam's reason "an enlightened reason" and "a true knowledge of God."⁴

This image of God was so obscured and corrupted by the entrance of sin that we cannot now even grasp it with our intellect. All our faculties today are leprous, dull, "and utterly dead."⁵ However, he modified this harsh judgment by saying that "intellect and will have remained, but both very much impaired." This statement is indeed part of a larger one in which Luther asserted that the gospel has brought about the possible restoration of man's original image. "And so," Luther concluded, "the gospel brings it about that we are formed once more according to that familiar and indeed better image, because we are born again into eternal life by faith, that we may live in God and with God and be one with Him, as Christ says (John 17:23)."⁶

The foregoing brief summary contains the cycle of Luther's doctrine of reason. God created man with an "enlightened reason." It was seriously debased by Adam's sin, "almost completely lost," but was restored by the gospel as men are born again "into the hope of eternal life by faith."⁷

In his "Disputation Concerning Man," in the year 1536, Luther presented for debate several theses dealing with reason. Here are some of them:

"Thesis 4. And it is certainly true that reason is the most important and the highest in rank among all things and, in comparison with other things of this life, the best and something divine.

"Thesis 5. It is the inventor and mentor of all the arts, medicines, laws, and of whatsoever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory men possess in this life. . . .

"Thesis 7. Holy Scripture also makes it lord over the earth, birds, fish, and cattle, saying, 'Have dominion.' Genesis 1:28.

"Thesis 8. That is, that it is a sun and a kind of god appointed

to administer these things in this life.

"Thesis 9. Nor did God, after the fall of Adam, take away this majesty of reason, but rather confirmed it!"⁸

And in Thesis 24 he called reason even after sin "that most beautiful and most excellent of all creatures," only to add at once that it remains since sin under the power of the devil.⁹

Clearly Luther gave reason a place of considerable importance in all mundane activities of man. In the lectures on the first chapter of Genesis, he referred to several renowned philosophers, Aristotle included, who had speculated on the origins of elements, materials, and qualities of matter, and found their reasoning plausible as containing "the foundation for the arts." "It would," he asserted, "be boorish to pay no attention to them or to regard them with contempt, especially since in some respects they are in agreement with experience." Only Averroes, the Islamic thinker, he rejected outright as having the "utmost ignorance of God." Plato was treated more gently in his errors.¹⁰

The mathematical disciplines help man to soar high above the earth, Luther believed, and to concern himself with heavenly things. Beasts cannot do this. Man alone does it. "Therefore man is a creature created to inhabit the celestial regions and to live an eternal life when, after a while, he has left the earth. For this is the meaning of the fact that he cannot only speak and form judgments (things which belong to dialectics and rhetoric) but also learns all the sciences thoroughly."¹¹

This was Luther, the so-called anti-intellectual, the man who could, it is said, reach only animal greatness. But he could help to introduce a humanistic curriculum in the University of Wittenberg, with emphasis on Hebrew, Greek, Latin, history, and mathematics. He could help to create the German language. Yet he could not pass the one-sided judgment of some critics. The basic reasons for his low status take us to his theology.

In his "Disputation Concerning Man," referred to above, Luther called reason "the most beautiful and most excellent of all creatures." Then he asserted: "That the whole man and every man, whether he be king, lord, servant, wise, just, and richly endowed with the good things of this life, nevertheless is and remains guilty of sin and death, under the power of Satan."¹²

Any and all who speak contrary to this fact are "impiously in opposition to theology," said Luther; and those who introduce Aristotle "to witness that reason aspires to the best things" are likewise in opposition to theology, because Aristotle "knows nothing of theological man." Further, all who

say that man has free will to choose good and evil, life or death, do not know what they are talking about, for "man lives in sin and daily is justified or becomes more polluted."¹³

This is precisely Luther's point of departure from philosophy. Philosophy, he insisted, does not know the efficient cause, which is God the Creator, nor the final cause, which is a return to God through eternal life found in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, provided man believes in Him.¹⁴

Luther's distrust of philosophy began early. When he was sent to Wittenberg in the winter of 1508-1509 to lecture on the *Ethics of Aristotle* and also to pursue his theological studies, he wrote his friend John Braun in Erfurt that his studies were very severe—"especially philosophy, which from the first I would willingly have changed for theology; I mean the theology which searches out the meat of the nut, and the kernel of the grain and the marrow of the bones. But God is God; man often, if not always, is at fault in his pronouncements."¹⁵

It is the last sentence in Luther's statement that places God's Word or theology against man's word or philosophy. Luther already seemed to sense which way he would take.

That way is more clearly indicated in his marginal notes on Augustine and on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, both of which he annotated in the years 1509-1511. In these notes reason is given important functions. It has the capacity to pass judgments and to discern what is proper. It must fight evil desires that war against the law of God and so ensure obedience to the law. It also possesses the power to negate and to show that "philosophy is entirely foolishness." But it cannot go beyond things natural; all else must be settled by Scripture and faith. And should even important doctors of the church, or even an angel from heaven, teach matters not in harmony with Scripture, let them be accursed. "Here I have the Bible on my side."

Philosophy and philosophers Luther did not treat kindly. Aristotle he classed as a babbler and a rancid philosopher, whose hapless defenders had undertaken to reconcile with the pure truth. The Stoics, who in Luther's time seemed to be most numerous, he accused of rejoicing in creating new concepts. Nor did such theologians as Scotus, Biel, and the rest of the Ockhamists escape his denunciation. The philosophers claim to understand everything, he said, but they are of the earth, earthy, and their speculations are but smoke.

Theology, on the other hand, according to Luther, is heaven and often deals with problems that can only be understood through the Holy Spirit. In this realm the wisdom of man is folly, and it has pleased God to save the believers through divine folly. Here humility is the guideline to all under-

standing and the Spirit is the teacher.¹⁶

From Luther's harsh and explosive marginal note of 1509-1511 we go to his first series of lectures on the Psalms.¹⁷ He was ordered to comment on the Psalter, probably by Staupitz; and in 1513 he began the course, which for its completion would take him into 1515. Here we meet the young doctor of theology, now also professor of that subject in the University of Wittenberg. The subject of the entire course, according to his own announcement, is sin, from which we must depart, and righteousness, toward which we must move incessantly. To Luther this was a purely theological subject, and the key to understanding it is the Bible. At this time he was mastering all that Holy Scripture has to say on this problem, and, according to Luther, it says a very great deal.

In these lectures the term "reason" was used sparingly. In one of his comments he called reason the sixth sense in man. "Reason makes man" and sets him apart from all creatures.¹⁸ In the realm of daily life he can contribute many correct judgments. He can even attain to a certain consciousness of God as the object worthy of praise and thanks for life and its blessings. Reason can also fathom that man in his relations with man should not harm his fellow but should do him good.

However, as Luther delved into the problem of sin and its cure, it was soon obvious that reason could not be of any help. Reason, as used by the philosophers, depends on its own power. It does not understand faith; hence, it should lift itself up and go into captivity to heavenly authority. Reason seeks to find God in His power and wisdom in His creation, while He can be known only in Jesus Christ. It is Christ whom man must find in order to find God. Reason of itself is blind and cannot see God as He truly is.¹⁹

Luther's sharp rejection of reason was closely bound up with his intensified concept of sin. From his earlier view of man's ability to perform good works of his own free will, he was now coming, by means of his own experience, the help of Augustine, and his study of Scripture, to a wholly different understanding of sin. The philosophers and scholastics had posed and proposed a different God from the God of Scripture. Theirs was a God of reason, a God of good works which man can do and by doing help to win God's favor and deserved grace. But this, Luther now found, is not the God of Scripture. Man is hopelessly debilitated by original sin. He has lost the image of God and can be restored only by divine intervention. Theology, not philosophy, holds the key to this great mystery.

In his lectures on the Psalms, Luther was not able to utilize this key fully. His system of religious thought was taking shape, but it was still very much

monastic and traditional in character. He could not resolve the many problems and questions that he raised.

In the lectures on Romans, 1515-1516, he had visibly progressed. As for reason, he still taught that it distinguishes man from other living things, and so is highly significant. Reason can sense and understand that natural law is indelibly implanted in man and gives him ethical principles which he must not neglect in everyday secular life. But it cannot make him good or virtuous before God. Here is where philosophy goes astray. It can make us good only before man, whereas "the goodness of God makes us good and our actions as well." "It is therefore wrong," Luther concluded, "to define virtue in the way of Aristotle: It makes us perfect and produces laudable acts only in the sense that it makes us perfect and causes our acts to be praiseworthy before men and in our own eyes. Before God this is abominable, and the opposite would please Him much more."²⁰

Luther completed his doctrine of sin in this series of lectures on Romans. He gave little credit to natural man, but he could say that even at our lowest state "we are not so thoroughly inclined toward evil that there is not left to us a portion which is affected toward the good." However, Luther asserted immediately, there is little comfort for man in this assurance because "man cannot but seek his own and love himself above everything. This is the sum and substance of all his faults."²¹

Throughout the lectures Luther was very critical of philosophers and scholastic theologians. The scholastics, he maintained, do not deal "adequately with sin and grace." They are ignorant of the relation between grace and the law. They do not understand the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. They are arrogant, ignorant of sin, indeed, ignorant even of God.²²

Luther considered it his duty to cry out against philosophy and to turn "men to Holy Scripture." He was persuaded "that it is a vain study doomed to perdition." He urged his students to be done quickly with such studies, or at best, learn them in order to refute them. "It is high time that we be transferred from other studies and learn Jesus Christ 'and Him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2:2)." The scholars and the theologians are also infected by their own "prudence of the flesh, so that all their marvelous display of intellectual power" is misguided.²³

His warfare against philosophy and scholasticism continued unabated, even on the campus of the university, as seen in the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*,²⁴ which Luther wrote for his student Franz Gunther to defend on September 4, 1517. Here Aristotle, the god of the scholastics, was dethroned. "The whole Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light," asserted Luther.

Aristotle cannot make a theologian; "indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle." Logic and syllogistic reasoning cannot stand up when applied to divine terms, he continued, but divine terms and truths do not necessarily contradict syllogistic forms. A logic of faith is fashioned in vain, and theologians need not be logicians. In Bible study, dialectic will only do harm.

In his letters from this period Luther was very harsh against the philosophers and the schoolmen. Aristotle is "the chief of all charlatans" and "the most subtle seducer of gifted people."²⁵ As for the schoolmen, he stated, "All my files are filled with materials against [their] books, which I consider absolutely useless." And again: "Our theology and St. Augustine are progressing well, and with God's help rule at our university. Aristotle is gradually falling from his throne, and his final doom is only a matter of time. It is amazing how the lectures on the *Sentences* [by Peter Lombard] are disdained."²⁶

We must not forget that Luther in all his sweeping denunciation of philosophers did not include every single thinker. The "divine Plato," as the Reformer once called that Greek, escaped, and his "interaction of ideas" Luther called "ingenious." Pythagoras was also "ingenious" for his "mathematical order of material things," and "if Anaxagoras placed infinity before form, as it seems he did, he was the best of philosophers," Aristotle notwithstanding.²⁷ Luther, then, did not denounce philosophers and schoolmen because they used reason to establish theories and doctrines, but because they used it to establish false theories and false doctrines, that is, to contravene Holy Scripture. In the theses which he prepared for the *Heidelberg Disputation*²⁸ in the spring of 1518 he emphasized this aspect of the problem. We quote several theses:

"Thesis 18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ. . . .

"Thesis 20. He deserves to be called a theologian—who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

"Thesis 21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is. . . .

"Thesis 29. He who wishes to philosophize by using Aristotle without danger to his soul must first become thoroughly foolish in Christ."

Aristotle was so dangerous, Luther believed, because he did not recognize what natural reason can understand. Reason can conceive that God as the Creator is good, gracious, and merciful, and that He can help in times of need; but Aristotle would have none of these things and even derided ideas

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of Plato that were sounder than his own. He was a materialist in all his ways who refused to recognize the absolute power of God; for had he done so, he would have believed that matter could not exist of itself alone.²⁹

Here lies reason's greatest trouble, Luther taught. It knows that God is, but who and what it is that is called God reason does not know. And so reason can do just what the Jews did when Christ walked on earth and John the Baptist witnessed to His presence. Their hearts sensed that Christ was among them and walked among the people; but who He really was they did not know, and that Jesus of Nazareth was Christ none could understand. Thus, reason plays blind cow with God and blunders totally, so that it again and again names as God that which is not God, and so adds confusion to ignorance until the devil, or reason's own darkness which is ruled by the devil, takes control.³⁰

This is what had happened to Adam's enlightened reason in Paradise, Luther taught. There, reason was preeminent and stamped man as the image of God. The entry of sin changed everything. Yet reason was not altogether debilitated. Indeed, a very great deal of it remained, but it was seared by sin. Still it became and has remained the prime factor in the kingdom of evil and has enslaved man continuously. The triumphs of reason in history should not make man proud.

But Luther found a way out. It was through his doctrine of salvation as revealed in the Bible. There God confronts sinful reason and man with divine sovereignty and power and assures him of freedom from the shackles of sin in the gift of Jesus Christ through whom the sinner receives, freely and without reservation, righteousness by faith alone. It is God's gift to man and suffices for salvation.

At about this point we must introduce another element in Luther's doctrine of reason. God not only gives man righteousness by faith alone, he also confronts man with His law which must be kept because it is "holy and just and good." Here arose a serious problem for Luther. His most relentless criticism of reason came in his attempt to clear up this problem; indeed, his strictures on philosophy and the schoolmen were almost forgotten as he leveled off against reason in its relation to a holy law.

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5. LW 1, p. 66.
6. LW 1, p. 64.
7. LW 1, p. 67.
8. LW 34, p. 137.
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18. WA 3, p. 634.
19. Lohse, *op. cit.*, pp. 30 ff.
20. Romans, p. 266.
21. Romans, pp. 88, 89.
22. Romans, pp. 128, 133, 152.
23. Romans, pp. 236, 237.
24. LW 31, pp. 9-16.
25. LW 48, p. 38.
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Ten Commandments

T

ew subjects in Luther's theology have received more attention than his doctrine concerning the Ten Commandments. Even during his lifetime there were schools of thought on this subject, and since then scholars have continued to subject his many statements on the law to a high degree of scrutiny and analysis. Some find three uses of the law in Luther, others two, while at times the reader of Luther feels left with little or no clue as to what the Reformer really thought on the subject.

Luther's earliest published statements on the Ten Commandments occur in personal prayer books intended to replace Roman prayer books: *Seven Penitential Psalms* (1517), *Sermon on Preparation for Death*, *Sermon on Contemplating the Holy Suffering of Christ*, and *Sermon on the Holy, Revered Sacrament of Baptism* (all in 1519), and his *Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer* (1520).

In 1522 he took the *Short Form of the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer*, added *Hail Mary*, which is found in every Roman prayer book, made changes in all this material, and published it as his own *Personal Prayer Book*.¹ The publication enjoyed instant and continuous success. Luther made further changes and added new materials from time to time, but basically the work remained in its original form and served as the evangelical prayer book in place of Roman publications.²

In a brief introduction Luther explained his reasons for the work. Existing Roman prayer books contained much tomfoolery about prayers to God and His saints, he said; and they needed a basic revision if not total extinction. However, Christian people who cannot read the Bible should learn from memory the *Ten Commandments, the Creed, and the Lord's Prayer*, since

"the total content of Scripture and preaching and everything a Christian needs to know is quite fully and adequately comprehended in these three items."³ Everyone, in order to be saved, needs to know three things. First, he must know "what to do and what to leave undone." Man, as Luther contended so often, is sick and must find healing. This is the function of the Ten Commandments. They help him recognize his sickness so that he may know what to do or to refrain from doing, "consent to or refuse, and so he will recognize himself to be a sinful and wicked person."⁴

In commenting upon the commandments Luther followed the traditional abbreviated Roman usage of the original text. In this usage, the first table contains three commands, the second seven. Luther generally commented on the ninth and the tenth commands as if they were but one. He probably knew of the Hussite custom of putting four commandments on the first table and six on the second, and of giving all of them in their entirety as found in Exodus 20:1-17, but he rarely followed this practice. For the third (Hussite fourth) commandment he said simply, "You shall sanctify the day of rest," or "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

As for the subject matter of each table, he recognized that the first deals with man's duty toward God, the second with his duty "toward his fellowman and neighbor."

In his personal prayer book, Luther added to his comments on the meaning of each command a long list of statements under the heading, "What It Means to Break the Commandments." He seemed to exhaust the list of admonitions and warnings, only to follow them with another list, "Fulfilling the Commandments," a series of pithy, literary observations on commandment keeping. In the last paragraph of these comments we come upon the following:

"The person who lives the best life does not live for himself; he who lives for himself lives the most dastardly kind of life. This is what the Ten Commandments teach, and they show us how few persons really live a good life, yes, that not one person is able to live this good life. Now that we recognize this, we must find out where to get the [medicinal] herbs to enable us to live a good life and fulfill the commandments."⁵

The guidelines which Luther gave on the meaning of the Ten Commandments in this early and very personal publication, he never forsook. The commands were given to show us the good life, but they cannot provide the medicine for living it. This is the Luther formula in a nutshell.

In 1529 his *Large Catechism* appeared. Here the Reformer intended to give his considered views on the doctrines under discussion. Commenting

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on the Ten Commandments in their relation to faith, he asserted that since they "are in the hearts of all men," they can be understood by man. Not so with faith. No human wisdom can understand it. The Holy Spirit alone can teach it. But as the Holy Spirit teaches faith to man, He imparts therewith "love and zest for all of God's commandments, because we see that He gives us all that He can give and all that He has to help and support us in keeping the Ten Commandments."⁶

Luther's colleague, Agricola, developed the theory that the Ten Commandments had been completely abolished through the sacrifice of Christ, and that repentance springs not from the law but from the gospel. This provoked considerable discussion and a whole series of professional disputations in the years 1537 to 1540 on the part of Luther, who challenged and rejected Agricola's views as antinomian, or against God's law. In numerous statements in the course of the debates he explained and defended his view of the law as a necessary factor in his doctrine of salvation.

"The Decalogue is not Moses' law," Luther declared, "neither was he the first to give it; but the Decalogue is inscribed in the whole world and insculptured in the minds of all men from the foundation of the world."⁷ Moses was therefore not the originator of the law. But man was brutish, inhuman, and failed to honor and love God and give Him praise and devotion. When man eventually reached the pass where he regarded neither God nor his fellowmen, God renewed at Sinai His laws and wrote them with His own finger on tables of stone. In this divine manifestation Moses was the interpreter and illustrator of the law written in the minds of all men wherever they may be under the sun.⁸

In such terms Luther presented his views of the eternity of God's law. In another connection he dealt with its universality. "So far as the Ten Commandments are concerned," he declared, "there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, since God is not God of the Jews alone but also of the Gentiles, as says St. Paul and as it is testified to by the kings of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, et cetera."⁹

Perhaps the most explicit statement found in Luther's works on this aspect of the law is the following: "Finally we speak also of the Ten Commandments, for it is possible that the Jews may claim that the Ten Commandments are Moses' law, given on Sinai to the Jews or the children of Abraham. Here you should reply that if the Ten Commandments shall be called Moses' law, then Moses came altogether too late and addressed himself to too few people. The Ten Commandments were here not only before Moses but also before Abraham and all the patriarchs, and they had gone to all parts of the world.

For if Moses had never come or if Abraham had never been born, the Ten Commandments would have ruled from the beginning even as they actually did and still do."¹⁰

These opinions were penned by Luther in 1538, so that we are not dealing with the young but with the old Luther. But how could he speak of the Ten Commandments before Abraham or before all the patriarchs? He fell back on his concept of natural law, which to his mind is eternal. On August 27, 1525, he preached a sermon on "How Christians Should Regard Moses." He related how once God proclaimed His law from Sinai in power, glory, and majesty so that the people of Israel actually heard the trumpets and the sound of God as the holy law was announced, which tells man what he owes and must give God. As Luther developed his thoughts on the place of Moses in the Christian dispensation, he said that if any commandment or injunction found in Moses agrees with natural law, it was good and should be kept. "Whatever God in heaven gave the Jews through Moses, that He also has inscribed in the hearts of men. Therefore I keep the commandments which Moses gave, not because Moses commanded them but because they are implanted in me by nature, and because Moses and nature agree."¹¹

In a most important statement he enlarged on the theme of the law as being written in the hearts of men. "The law," he said, "is written in the recess of the heart so that nothing can remove it. This we learn from the penitential psalms where the dear saints could not endure the anger of God, which can be nothing but the sensitive preaching of the law in the conscience. And the devil knows full well that it is not possible to remove the law from the heart, as is stated by St. Paul in Romans, chapter 2, where the heathen who have not received the law from Moses, nevertheless are their own law in that they testify that the law is written in their hearts."¹²

The law of nature which Luther found written in the hearts of "all men from the beginning of the world" must needs have universal application. It binds "not only the Jews but also the heathen, for it is the eternal and immutable decree of God concerning the worship of God and the love of one's neighbor."¹³ He could also say that the "written law was given to the Jews alone," and immediately follow this statement with, "but the heathen have a law written in their hearts, that is, born with them"; and this law we today are "compelled to teach diligently." This identifies clearly the two laws as being identical in Luther's mind. What he is pointing out in these statements is that "the Decalogue and other laws that originated with the fathers [patriarchs] are not Mosaic. Only those ceremonials that pertain to definite persons are Mosaic."¹⁴

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It would seem that the Ten Commandments were very much a part of Luther's theology. When the antinomians wanted the doctrine of repentance to begin directly from grace, he countered that he himself "did not proceed in this manner"; and he counseled, "Therefore let us utterly reject the antinomians, who chase the law out of the church and want to teach repentance by means of the gospel."¹⁵

In 1528 appeared the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors*. This collection was written by Melanchthon with Luther's approval and help, and is thus considered part of Luther's works. It refers to the Ten Commandments several times, enjoining preachers "to proclaim and explain the Ten Commandments often and earnestly" and to tell "how God will punish those who do not keep them and how He often has inflicted temporal punishment."¹⁶ The reason for such assiduous teaching is that "good works are therein comprehended." "God has no delight in those who do not obey the commandments."¹⁷ The commandments are "to be used so that the people be exhorted to fear God," and they are to be spelled out "word for word," just as are the Lord's Prayer and the Creed, for the children and the unschooled folk.¹⁸

In a series of sermons on the *Ten Commandments* given in 1516-1517 and then revised and published in 1520 as *A Short Exposition of the Decalogue, the Apostle's Creed, and the Lord's Prayer*,¹⁹ we come upon an evaluation of the Decalogue from Luther's early days as a Reformer. "It is therefore clear," Luther said, "that the Ten Commandments comprise in an orderly and succinct manner, all the teachings which are needed in the course of human life. If a man means to keep them, he will be busy in good works day by day. He will have no need to choose some other occupation, to go from place to place, or do anything not mentioned in the commandments."²⁰

On first reading this may sound as if Luther ascribed to commandment keeping as such the way to salvation. As a monk he no doubt had tried such a course of living but without success. It had been a life for himself altogether. Now, however, he was living for God and for mankind, and so the fulfillment of the Decalogue "consists in love for others and not for ourselves. Therefore," he continued, "the best life is one lived quite without regard for oneself; and that is why the Ten Commandments give their teaching as they do. They show how few men live good lives; indeed, as man, no one's life is good. Once we see this, we must go on to learn where we can obtain that which will enable us to live a good life and fulfill the commandments."²¹

Here Luther was but stating what he was to repeat two years later in his

personal prayer book. The commandments do not provide the medicine for living the good life, but they show where we can obtain it. And therewith we obey and fulfill them.

On another occasion he said: "My friend, what is the use of continual fasting and praying, of giving away everything you have for God's sake (1 Corinthians 13:3), of whipping yourself to death, and of doing twice as many good works as all the Carthusians put together, if meanwhile you ignore the commandments which God wants you to obey?"²²

Perhaps the clearest statement from Luther on the universal import of the law is found in his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount.²³ According to the Reformer, Christ began from the bottom and went to the top in clarifying and commanding the laws which the "Pharisees and the scribes had completely obscured and distorted." Christ made clear that He had no intention of abolishing the law, indeed He came for the purpose of "correcting and confirming the teaching of the law in opposition to those who were weakening it by their teaching."²⁴

Here Luther points out that the charge made by the Jews against Christ was that He condemned the law and the prophets, the fathers, and the whole nation. His answer was a categorical No. Indeed, He was more scrupulous and serious in His observance of them than were the Jews. Christ would not let "an iota or a dot perish or be useless," indeed, He would throw out of the kingdom of heaven anyone who despised or departed from the very smallest commandment in His teaching. Then he makes Christ say: "Thus we are in agreement that Moses and the prophets must be taught and enforced rigidly, but the issue is this: since both of us have the obligation and the desire to teach the law, it has to be determined which of the two sides is correctly citing and interpreting Scripture or God's law. This is the point of issue, and here I have to salt and denounce. With their glosses the Jews have distorted and corrupted the law, and I have come to set it straight."²⁵

Luther continues to interpret Christ's words: "I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it." "That is: I do not intend to bring another law or a new law, but to take the very Scriptures which you have and to emphasize them, dealing with them in such a way as to teach you how to behave.' What the gospel or the preaching of Christ brings is not a new doctrine to undo or change the law, but, as St. Paul says (Romans 1:2), the very same thing that was 'promised beforehand through the prophets in the Scripture.'"²⁶

Observe how Luther here uses the term "law and prophets." Generally he equates this expression with the Old Testament. But he is also thinking

constantly of "law" in a limited sense. For example, here he falls back on Augustine in interpreting the meaning of "fulfill." Augustine said that "fulfilling the law meant, first, supplementing its deficiencies," and "carrying out its content in works and in life."²⁷

Luther insists that Augustine's first interpretation was mistaken. "All by itself," says Luther, "the law is so rich and perfect that no one need to add anything to it." The entire gospel proclamation about Christ is based on the Old Testament. "Therefore, no one, not even Christ Himself, can improve upon the law." Just what is there to improve on in the first commandment: "You shall love God with all your heart"? Deuteronomy 6:5. Indeed, when Christ gives us grace and the Spirit to enable us to keep the law, He goes beyond the law, but that is not "supplementing the law" but teaching the law properly.²⁸

The point was, argues Luther, that the Jewish leaders had weakened and abolished the law with glosses. The papists have done the same with the gospel and Scripture, Luther charges. They have ignored completely the key doctrine of righteousness by faith in Christ. They have removed one kind from the sacrament and have concealed the words of the sacrament; they have had the audacity to take the commandments which Christ lays down here and to preach them as bits of good advice "rather than as necessary commandments," the very least of which must not be left unobserved. This is what Christ does with the law: "He intends, rather, to preach it, to emphasize it, to show its real kernel and meaning, and to teach them what the law is and what it requires."²⁹

Luther continues to put words into the speech of Christ and then to add his own interpretation. Thus, he says that Christ forbids any manipulation of God's commandments or any interpretation that would lead to immorality and wickedness. He quotes Matthew 18:9: "It is better for thee to enter into life with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into hell-fire." Then he adds: "He does not want the kind of saints that run away from human society. If that were to become prevalent, the Ten Commandments would become unnecessary. If I am in a desert, isolated from human society, it is no credit to me that I do not commit adultery or that I do not murder or steal."³⁰

Thus we see that there could be no question in Luther's mind that when Christ used the word "law" in these comments, he meant the Ten Commandments. Luther was crystal clear on that point. And it was equally clear to him that the law and the gospel are inseparable. In his debates with the antinomians he declared: "The law and the gospel cannot and should not be

separated, just as repentance and forgiveness of sins cannot be. For these two are tied together and entwined. For to preach the forgiveness of sins is nothing else than to indicate and show the existence of sins."³¹

If the law and the gospel are inseparable, Luther argued, so are sin, law, gospel, and Christ inseparable. "If people are not sick, what is the use of doctors? By the same reasoning, if there is no law by which sin is made sin, to what purpose is the work of Christ? If I am not a sinner, Christ showed me nothing because I am not a sinner; that is, I do not know that I am a sinner and I live without the law. For Christ said: 'I did not come to call the just but sinners to repentance.' But if the law is eliminated, sin is eliminated, the sinner is eliminated, and Christ is eliminated since He is no longer necessary."³²

The antinomians reasoned that circumcision was more important than the law. Luther replied that the Decalogue was greater and more valid because it "was insculptured in all hearts and minds and would remain with us in the future life."

"Circumcision, however, like baptism, will not remain" Luther insisted; "only the Decalogue is eternal. . . . Finally the Decalogue is more noble because it drew Christ down from heaven. For if it were not for the Decalogue accusing and condemning us, for what purpose, I ask, did Christ descend?"³³

Luther called the law eternal; it would remain in the future life. Did he mean that it would remain in principle? He was not altogether clear. Here is one statement: "In the future life we will not have the law, but we will be just and holy like the angels. In the present life, however, we are not perfect but sinners, and so the law must be taught and inculcated to stir us to warfare lest we shut our mouths, become indifferent, and perish."³⁴

It would seem from our brief study that Luther understood the character and the meaning of the Decalogue. He recognized its perpetuity and its use in the history of mankind. He preached it, and he insisted that others preach it. Still, some people of his time accused him of not emphasizing the law enough, while some thought he put too much stress on it.

For the former he wrote on one occasion that he was surprised that anyone could say that he would reject the Ten Commandments. He pointed out that he had written an exposition of the Decalogue which was used and preached upon in all his churches; he had written the confession of faith and the *Apology* and other books, also the liturgy to be sung. The subject of the law had been portrayed in paintings, put into print, represented in wood-cuts, and was even now lisped by the children early, noon, and evening. He said that he did not know what more could be done about the law except

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to live and to practice it. As for himself, he concluded, though old and learned, he spoke it daily, as a child, word for word.³⁵

Luther himself was certain that he honored, respected, and feared the law.

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1. LW 43, pp. 11-45.
2. See Translator's Introduction in LW 43, pp. 5-10.
3. LW 43, p. 13.
4. LW 43, p. 14.
5. LW 43, p. 24.
6. WA 30, I, p. 192.
7. WA 39, I, p. 478.
8. WA 39, I, p. 454.
9. WA 50, p. 334.
10. WA 50, p. 330.
11. WA 16, p. 380.
12. WA 50, p. 471.
13. LW 3, p. 84.
14. LW 5, p. 20. Brackets ours.
15. LW 4, p. 49, 51.
16. LW 40, p. 276.
17. LW 40, p. 277.
18. LW 40, p. 308.
19. Found in *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, transl. and ed. B. L. Woolf. Vol. 1, pp. 71-99 (London, 1952).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
22. LW 21, p. 80.
23. LW 21, pp. 3-294.
24. LW 21, p. 67.
25. LW 21, p. 68.
26. LW 21, p. 69.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. LW 21, p. 70.
30. LW 21, p. 85.
31. WA 29, I, p. 416.
32. WA 29, I, p. 546.
33. WA 29, I, p. 413.
34. WA 29, I, p. 510.
35. WA 50, p. 470.

Law and Gospel



Despite the fact that Luther considered the Ten Commandments extremely important in his doctrine of salvation, thus giving them a strong place in his theology, in the course of his career he also sharply criticized and made seemingly derogatory declarations on the law of God. These caustic statements have been analyzed variously by students of Luther's thought. Some of them come close to making the Reformer history's greatest antinomian, a man mercilessly attacking the law.

Luther took the Ten Commandments as his point of departure on the approach to the law and the gospel, believing that these two are of inseparable theological greatness. Without the law there is no gospel. In one of his principal statements on this subject, he posed this question: "Who, then, could know . . . Christ and why Christ suffered for us if no one knew what sin or law meant?" And this is his answer:

"Therefore, must the law be preached wheresoever Christ is preached, even though the word is not used, so that our conscience will be terrified by the law when it hears how dearly Christ suffered to fulfill the law for us. Why, then, do we want to do away with that which cannot be done away with, indeed, which is only deeper implanted as we try to eliminate it? Because the law terrifies sorely when I hear that Christ the Son of God had to bear it all for me. For in the Son of God I behold as in the very act the anger of God, which the law can show me only in words and worthless works."¹

This may be Luther's finest statement on the use of the law. It frightens our conscience through the sufferings of Christ, on whom God's anger was poured out for our sake. In other words, the law, sin, and Christ were inseparable in Luther's thought.

But there is another use of the law. In the *Instructions for the Visitors of*

Parish Pastors (1528), we have the statement that the "Ten Commandments are to be assiduously taught, for all good works are therein comprehended." It may seem startling to read that the law is also a source of good works, but the expression is clarified immediately as we read: "They are called good works not only because they are done for the welfare of our neighbors, but because God has commanded them; so they are well pleasing to God. God has no delight in those who do not obey the commandments, as is stated in Micah 6(:8): 'O man, I will show you what is good and what God requires of you, namely, to do justice. Yea, do justice, delight to do good to your neighbor, and walk humbly before God.'"²

Luther never ceased to teach that nature by itself cannot cure its ills or even recognize them. Nature holds the appearance of good as "precious and blessed," and leads many astray. No amount of preaching about repentance, confessions, and restitution can suffice if faith is left out; indeed, these doctrines become "simply impious and seductive." We may rest assured, then, that the good works contained in the law "are works of grace and faith, because the person who does them does not believe that he is justified by them but he desires to be justified."³

Therefore, preaching must deal with both law and gospel. "We must," said Luther, "preach the Word of God and the commandments of God, to alarm sinners, and make their sins plain so that they repent and be converted." But we cannot stop there, he added; we must also preach what he called "the second word," that is, the promise of grace and faith without which "commandments, repentance, and everything else are useless." He continued: "Repentance proceeds from the law of God, but faith or grace from the promise of God. . . . Accordingly, man is consoled and exalted by faith in the divine promise after he has been humbled and led to a knowledge of himself by the threats and the fear of the divine law."⁴

Here we have Luther's doctrine of the law and the gospel stated in a short form. The law frightens, indeed, terrifies us as we see and understand its power, which was so great that it killed Christ and will surely destroy us unless we find extrahuman succor. The law reveals God's anger over sin; Christ's death reveals God's love for sinners. For Christ conquered sin, death, and hell and thus cleared the way for man's salvation.

This has been stated nicely by W. Pauck in *The Heritage of the Reformation*. He discusses the relation between the law and gospel, as viewed in Luther's works, and concludes: "What is demanded by the law is fulfilled by the gospel. The law is the call to the good life; the gospel opens the door to it. What morality envisages becomes an event in the deeds of love.

For the gospel transcends the law but it does not suspend it."⁵

Luther in many passages emphasized the preeminence of faith in the work of salvation. Here is one: "It is faith alone that achieves this that all sins are remitted to us and that the whole Decalogue is fulfilled by faith, because faith alone gives me Christ, who is the fulfillment and the end of the law. What else does faith give? It imparts and brings with it the Holy Spirit, from whom all good works flow."⁶

This is so important a point in Luther's doctrine of salvation as to make us repeat, at the risk of being repetitious, one of Luther's longest and most illuminating declarations on this subject:

"Should you ask how it happens that faith alone justifies and offers us such a treasure of great benefits without works in view of the fact that so many works, ceremonies, and laws are prescribed in the Scriptures, I answer: First of all, remember what has been said, namely, that faith alone, without works, justifies, frees, and saves; we shall make this clearer later on. Here we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises. Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability. That is why they are called the Old Testament and constitute the Old Testament. . . . Now when a man has learned through the commandments to recognize his helplessness and is distressed about how he might satisfy the law—since the law must be fulfilled so that not a jot or tittle shall be lost, otherwise man will be condemned without hope—then, being truly humbled and reduced to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself nothing whereby he may be justified and saved. Here the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying . . . 'If you believe, you shall have all things; if you do not believe, you shall lack all things. . . .' God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing. . . . Therefore, the promises of God belong to the New Testament. Indeed, they are the New Testament."⁷

In such language Luther described a theological distinction between law and gospel distinctive in his doctrine of salvation. The Decalogue, natural law, and rites and ceremonies, few or many, belong to the Old Testament body of Scripture and serve to show what man should but cannot do to find acceptance and saving grace from God. For this he must go to the promise

of God or the New Testament where faith, not law, prevails.

Luther could distinguish between the two testaments to a very high degree. In a commentary on Psalm 118:20 he asserted: "For in the New Testament there is nothing but the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins, of grace, of justifying and sanctifying faith, and nothing about the works of the law or our own works. But the law, in its administration and treatment, aims of works, creates sinners, and multiplies sin and wrath, as St. Paul says in Romans and Galatians. It cannot contribute to righteousness. Therefore it may be called 'gates of sin or of unrighteousness.' The law is not grace. Since grace alone justifies, it is impossible for the law to justify. It must make men sinners and incite wrath (Romans 4:14)."⁸

One of his clearest distinctions between the law and the gospel is found in his comments on Deuteronomy 18:15. Here he discusses the ministry of the law, or the Old Testament, and the ministry of the gospel, or the New. The former was established by Moses and ended, as did its law and ceremonies, with Christ. Both ministries, however, are alike divine in their authority since both were raised up by God; "for through the law all must be humbled, and through the gospel all must be exalted."⁹

He continues to discuss the two ministries. The old, or the law, is directed to the old man, who is dead in sin, to urge him on and to show him his sin. This is the proper function of the law. The old man cannot "do what the law demands." The new ministry, or the New Testament, is for "those who are justified and are new men in the Spirit." Then he adds: "But where the godly are, there the law, which is intended only for humiliation of the ungodly through the recognition of their sin and weakness, is already abolished. The gospel teaches from what source you receive the power to fulfill the law. In this respect it commands nothing; nor does it force the spirit, which hastens of its own accord by faith. It adds some commands, but it does so to kill the remnants of the old man in the flesh, which is not yet justified. From these commands, however, the spirit is free, being satisfied with faith alone."¹⁰

He introduces a comment on Psalm 45:10, speaking on the theme or article "Christ is our King and our head," and becomes involved in sharp remarks on the abrogation of the law. "The law has been done away, in order that faith may rule the conscience," he asserts. This is a common enough expression in Luther, but he goes on to say that the "whole divine Law" has been abrogated. And he proceeds to give the reason: "The law does not stop troubling faith and the conscience in the baptized. Rather than permit this, Christ abrogates it also physically. Therefore, the whole law has

been taken away, first spiritually, from the conscience, but then also physically; though it did not have to be taken away there. He has, nevertheless, taken it away because of its peril to faith. Not only the divine worship ceased, but the temple and Jerusalem have been destroyed, and the Jews have been dispersed throughout the entire world—and justly."

Luther pauses here to tell us that the pope will also be destroyed with bishops, chapters of priests, and monasteries, since he does not stop persecuting the Word. Then he continues by saying that Scripture "speaks of the abrogation of the law in faith and the Spirit, since faith knows nothing of the law, works, our righteousness, and our strength." In Paradise, where Christ will rule in splendor, "preachments of the law" will not be permitted. Should the law come there, Luther advises: "throw it out of this chamber of the Bridegroom. Tell it to stay on earth and go to Damascus or to Sinai where it has a place."¹¹

So intense was Luther's feeling on the subject of the complete abrogation of the law by Christ that he became exultant over the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews. All this was just because the law was a peril to faith and would not stop troubling even the baptized. Therefore Christ ordered its abrogation, both spiritually and physically. And, should the law show its temerity by entering Paradise, it should forthwith be hurled out even to Sinai whence it came. If such a line of argument shows nothing else, it does show his gift of exaggeration.

In his debates with the antinomians Luther pursued the same argument but with less vehemence. The law cannot justify, nor is the act of justification its function. It accuses and condemns the conscience and mortifies; that is, it kills man. The office of the law is not perpetual, but it is necessary so long as the gospel of Christ is preached. "Therefore, both law and gospel must be retained in the church."¹²

To arguments that the law makes sin because it increases sin, Luther replied: "The law does not make sin; we do."¹³ Christ did not come to exact of us the obedience which the law requires, and which we are unable to give, but He came to show us complete obedience to the demands of the law, and thus He redeemed us from the condemnation of the law and gave us His righteousness.¹⁴

Christ was sent to the world by God. He took our flesh and subjected Himself to the law to free us from its maledictions. He was persecuted, blasphemed, and crucified between two thieves. But the law was not abrogated by all the violence done to the Son, indeed, it was augmented and corroborated in its mission, and it remains in its perpetual

character to demand perfect obedience.¹⁵

The antinomian debates covered all uses of the law in Luther's thought. Paul's statement in Galatians 3:24 that the law was our pedagogue, or custodian, until Christ, also came up for consideration. Luther found the words "a pedagogue unto Christ" a "word of solace and pleasant definition of the law, and it offers me consolation and confidence when I hear that the law is the pedagogue unto Christ." It was not, then, the devil or the robber who exercised not pedagogy, but desperation. He concluded: "Indeed, the law does not lead thus, but shows you sin."¹⁶ And in the fifth disputation against the antinomians, held in September, 1538, he says: "Indeed, in Christ the law is fulfilled, sin is deleted, death is destroyed."¹⁷

Now Luther had already lectured on the third chapter of Galatians in 1531, or approximately seven years before he penned the fifth debate with the antinomians. We must look at his comments on verse 24, because on the subject of the law and the gospel Luther's words here are rightly considered as final.

The Reformer said that there are two kinds of "unrighteous men: those who are to be justified and those who are not to be justified." Those who are not to be justified "are restrained by the civic use of the law; for they are bound with the chains of laws, as wild and untamed beasts are bound with ropes and chains." This use of the law never ceases and Paul does not deal chiefly with it in Galatians. The second use of the law is the theological by which those who are to be justified are disciplined for a time, "for it does not last forever, as the civic use does, but it looks forward to the coming of faith; and when Christ comes, it is finished."¹⁸

We must clarify Luther's language for our readers. He spoke of two classes of unrighteous men, one of whom will be justified, the other not. There is a third class of men, namely, those who have already been justified. The three classes comprise together all humanity. Actually, the three classes are theologically reduced to two, those who are the elect and those who are not. This is Luther's classification of all men.

We observe further that the two classes of unrighteous men are both under the law. Those who will not be justified are under the civil use of the law and are under it forever; those who will be justified are under it theologically or spiritually "for a time," that is, until faith comes when the law ceases. Then Luther made this most pertinent interpretation: "All the passages in which Paul treats the spiritual use of the law must be understood about those who are to be justified, not about those who have already been justified."¹⁹ This is the class for whom the law is a pedagogue or custodian until Christ comes.

Not a few interpreters of Luther fail to distinguish between the use or uses of the law as he understood them. They fail to show that the end of the law is not a chronological event in history but a spiritual event that is repeated constantly in human experience. All humanity is involved regardless of time. Luther did not set the law within a pattern of chronology that automatically fulfilled or abrogated it, but in a theological pattern where the law is either continuously binding or else fulfilled. "The Ten Commandments," he said, "are a mirror in which we see what kind of folk we are."²⁰

In a longer statement he explained the use of the law thus: "But the true use of the law is this, that I know that by the law I am being brought to an acknowledgment of sin and am being humbled, so that I may come to Christ and be justified by faith. But faith is neither a law nor a work; it is a sure confidence that takes hold of Christ, 'who is the end of the law' (Romans 10:4). How? Not by abrogating the old law and passing a new one or by being a judge who needs to be appeased by works, as the papists taught. But He 'is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified'; that is, everyone who believes in Christ is righteous, and the law cannot accuse him. This is the true power and the true use of the law. Therefore the law is good, holy, useful, and necessary, so long as one uses it in a legitimate way."²¹

Even with this statement Luther did not dispose of the law. To be sure, so far as conscience is concerned, "we are completely free of the law." "However, according to our feelings, sin still clings to the flesh and continually accuses and troubles the conscience."²²

Here we meet with Luther's dualism, which is so potent a factor in his theology. We are not under the law, but so long as the flesh remains, the law remains. The custodian which brings us to Christ never stops terrifying and distressing "the conscience with his demonstrations of sin and his threat of death."²³ So Christ comes daily to comfort our conscience, and as the conscience takes hold of Christ, so the law of flesh and sin, the fear of death and whatever other evils the law may bring, are diminished. He concluded: "Thus if I look at Christ, I am completely holy and pure, and I know nothing at all about the law; for Christ is my leaven. But if I look at my flesh, I feel greed, sexual desire, anger, pride, the terror of death, sadness, fear, hate, grumbling, and impatience against God. . . . Here there is still need for a custodian to discipline and torment the flesh—so that by this discipline sins may be diminished and the way prepared for Christ."²⁴

We are faced, then, with Luther's own conclusion: "To the extent that I take hold of Christ by faith, therefore, to that extent the law has been abro-

gated for me. But my flesh, the world, and the devil do not permit faith to be perfect." The leavening has begun, but we shall be completely leavened only "when this sinful body is destroyed and we arise new with Christ. Amen."²⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. LW 40, 277.
3. Romans, p. 118.
4. LW 31, p. 364.
5. W. Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Beacon Press, 1950), p. 226.
6. WA 39, I, p. 482.
7. LW 31, pp. 348, 349.
8. LW 14, p. 91.
9. LW 9, p. 178.
10. LW 9, pp. 179, 180.
11. LW 12, pp. 275, 276.
12. WA 39, I, p. 383.
13. WA 39, I, p. 378.
14. WA 39, I, p. 388.
15. WA 39, I, pp. 384, 385.
16. WA 39, I, p. 441.
17. WA 39, I, p. 354.
18. LW 26, p. 344.
19. LW 26, p. 347.
20. WA 16, p. 497.
21. LW 26, p. 348.
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23. LW 26, p. 24.
24. LW 26, p. 349.
25. LW 26, pp. 350, 351.

Moses

The years 1524-1525 were critical for Luther and his cause. The Peasants' Revolt ran its disastrous course during these months, and Luther, who took pride in his peasant ancestry and who had so much sympathy for the common people in his soul, penned the unfortunate pamphlet: *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of the Peasants*, where he advised the princes to "stab, smite, slay. If you die in doing it, good for you!"¹ Against the great humanist Erasmus he showed his bent for dialectic and sharp attack in a brilliant argument on *The Bondage of the Will*, where he disposed of the dearest of human possessions, man's free will.

Moses, the Hebrew lawgiver, became another object for Luther's wrath during this time of crisis. Thomas Münzer, the important social revolutionary and leader in the Peasants' Revolt, had based his inflammatory preaching primarily on the Old Testament prophecies dealing with the setting up of Christ's kingdom on the ruins of earthly kingdoms. Luther, who saw in Münzer the essence and quintessence of evil, reflected his hatred in the savage attack on the peasants. His former colleague and friend Andrew Karlstadt was busy preaching and writing on baptism, images, and the validity of the Mosaic law, subjects on which he disagreed basically with Luther.

In this atmosphere of crisis Luther wrote two well-known treatises, with Karlstadt as his principal target. The first, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments*,² came late in 1524. The second, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, was published in August, 1525.³

In the former Luther opened with a prayer: "May Christ grant . . . that we may not err and despair before the Satan [Karlstadt] who here pretends to vindicate the sacrament, but has much else in mind." He believed that

Karlstadt had nothing less in mind than to destroy the gospel "with cunning interpretation of Scripture."⁴ To counter this attempt, Luther discussed the basic articles of faith to which everyone must above all things hold fast. Then he launched into his subject:

"The first is the law of God, which is to be preached so that one thereby reveals and teaches how to recognize sin, Romans 3(:20) and 7(:7), as we have often shown in our writings. However, these prophets do not understand this correctly, for this means a truly spiritual preaching of the law, as Paul says in Romans 7(:14), and a right use of the law, as he says in 1 Timothy 1(:8).

"Secondly, when now sin is recognized and the law is so preached that the conscience is alarmed and humbled before God's wrath, we are then to preach the comforting word of the gospel and the forgiveness of sins, so that the conscience again may be comforted and established in the grace of God."⁵

These are his traditional views on the subject of the law and the gospel, and Karlstadt believed partly like Luther in this regard. But the Reformer, perhaps ignorant of Karlstadt's works on this subject, insisted that the false prophets did not understand these two necessary and important articles. Likewise, wrote Luther, they did not understand articles three and four, also traditional, that deal broadly with works and sanctification. Then, as a fifth article, Luther dealt with uses of the law. There is a spiritual use for Christians where the law reveals sin, and another use where the law is an instrument to control the masses or non-Christians. Let Luther speak: "But among the crude masses, or Mr. Everyman, we must use it bodily and roughly, so that they know what works of the law they are to do and what works ought to be left undone. Thus they are compelled by sword and law to be outwardly pious, much in the manner in which we control wild animals with chains and pens, so that external peace will exist among the people. To this end temporal authority is ordained, which God would have us honor and fear (Romans 13:3); (1 Peter 3); (1 Peter 2:13, 17)."⁶

Clearly, then, Luther found a civil use of the law. It pertains to external things such as foods, clothing, places, and persons. Karlstadt's error lay in his emphasis on these lowest things in place of the highest, "the best with the least, the first with the last." The Christian retains his freedom here, but Mr. Everyman, or the mob, does not. Karlstadt's error was, said Luther, that he inflated "the least significant ones as if the salvation of the world depended more on them than on Christ Himself."⁷

However, Luther must have known that he was getting nowhere by posing Karlstadt as an advocate of the lower or civil use of the law. The "false and

evil spirit" that was Karlstadt was interested, not in the control of the mob by the civil power but in the elimination of images as objects of worship, and in the keeping of the law as found in Moses. Luther was fully aware of this and countered in the following reasoning: "Now, then, let us get to the bottom of it all and say that these teachers of sin and Mosaic prophets are not to confuse us with Moses. We don't want to see or hear Moses. How do you like that, my dear rebels? We say further, that all such Mosaic teachers deny the gospel, banish Christ, and annul the whole New Testament. I now speak as a Christian for Christians. For Moses is given to the Jewish people alone, and does not concern us Gentiles and Christians. We have our gospel and New Testament. If they can prove from them that images must be put away, we will gladly follow them. If they, however, through Moses would make us Jews, we will not endure it."⁸

In these sweeping assertions Luther joined issue with his former colleague. Karlstadt had argued that the Decalogue could not be abolished because there was nothing ceremonial or judicial about it. Luther replied: "I know very well that this is an old and common distinction, but it is not an intelligent one. For out of the Ten Commandments flow and depend all the other commandments and the whole of Moses."⁹

God instituted many different ceremonies and acts of worship that flow out of the Decalogue, Luther pointed out. Out of the first commandment come acts relating to God as the only One among gods to be worshiped. Acts such as obedience to parents, abstention from adultery, murder, stealing, bearing false witness, and covetousness are all a part of the judicial laws of governments. They are also in the Decalogue and belong there, said Luther; and to indicate this fact God expressly put two ceremonial laws, namely, "images and the Sabbath," right in the Decalogue.¹⁰

Here Luther reached the crux of his debate against the heavenly prophets. Karlstadt would destroy images and would retain the Sabbath, when both, Luther believed, were purely ceremonial laws, put by God, to be sure, in the Decalogue but only on a temporary basis. Luther insisted that both were expressly abrogated in the New Testament. He placed them on a par with circumcision; then he went on to say that anyone who destroys images or keeps the Sabbath must also be circumcised and keep the whole Mosaic law.¹¹

It would seem, then, that Luther retained eight commandments of the Decalogue, since they are not ceremonial. But in fact this is not so. According to Luther, so far as Moses is concerned, all the Decalogue is abolished, but the commandments against killing, adultery, stealing, having other gods, et cetera, "are not Mosaic laws only, but also the natural law written in each

man's heart."¹² Here is Luther's explanation: "Where, then, the Mosaic law and the natural law are one, there the law remains and is not abrogated externally, but only through faith spiritually, which is nothing else than the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 3:31). . . . Therefore Moses' legislation about images and the Sabbath, and what else goes beyond the natural law, since it is not supported by the natural law, is free, null, and void, and is specifically given to the Jewish people alone."¹³

What Luther was aiming to say is that the Mosaic legislation is an amalgam or mixture of Hebrew tribal customs and laws set into a framework of natural law, which was insculptured by God first in nature and then in man at the creation of our world. In this way Luther could say the Decalogue did not begin with Moses, which acted as collector and editor, under God, of tribal customs and laws. How it came about that under these circumstances God put the commandments on images and the Sabbath into the first table of the law, only to be purged in the New Testament, Luther did not explain.

To Luther the Decalogue as Mosaic legislation was never abolished externally, except for two commandments, wherever it harmonized with natural law. This enabled Luther to ask and to answer a significant question:

"Why does one, then, keep and teach the Ten Commandments? Answer: Because the natural laws were never so orderly and well written as by Moses. Therefore, it is reasonable to follow the example of Moses. And I wish that we would accept even more of Moses in worldly matters such as the law about the bill of divorce, the Sabbath year, the year of jubilee, tithes, and the like."¹⁴

This is very much of an anticlimax. Moses should be followed because of his orderly way of writing the natural laws and civil laws. But to Luther order was the essence of things at this time. In page after page he belabored Karlstadt for inciting to riot and disorder, fearing Karlstadt's emphasis on the second and third commandments. To keep them as Karlstadt would have them kept, would, in Luther's mind, disrupt the established civil order and stir Mr. Everyman to rebellion. And of that Luther had seen enough.

When Luther delivered the sermon, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, on August 27, 1525, the crisis had abated considerably. The Peasant's Revolt had been crushed. Thomas Münzer had been executed. Only Karlstadt remained, but he was still dangerous. Luther did not mention him by name in this sermon. It was Moses who bore the brunt of the Reformer's attack. And Luther was rough.

He began by saying that on two occasions God Himself spoke to man in splendor, might, and power; namely, on Sinai and on Pentecost. The first time the Almighty's subject was doctrine and law; the second it was the gospel.

The two sermons were different, and we must have a good grasp of the subject matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is and what the gospel is. The commandments require us to do certain things; that is, the law is concerned solely with our behavior. For God says through the law: "Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you." Not so is the gospel. It reverses the approach of the law, does the opposite and says: "This is what God has done for you; He has let His Son be made flesh for you, has let Him be put to death for your sake." We have, then, "two kinds of doctrine and two kinds of works, those of God and those of men." The law tells us what we are to do and give to God, while the gospel "teaches us exclusively what has been given to us by God."¹⁵

Luther spoke movingly of the drama on Mount Sinai as God spoke the law. Suddenly he affirmed that it was not God who spoke but an angel who spoke for Him (Galatians 3:19). That is how Moses got the law. God caused this to be done for two reasons: "He wanted thereby to compel, burden, and press the Jews," and "to institute external and spiritual government."¹⁶

This led Luther to explain further what he had just observed: "These are two kingdoms: the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible; and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins. Between these two kingdoms still another has been placed in the middle, half spiritual and half temporal. It is constituted by the Jews, with commandments and outward ceremonies which prescribe their conduct toward God and men."¹⁷

In this manner Luther created a new state, half secular, half spiritual, with Moses as its lawgiver. It was Moses' state with his law and his ordering. Luther described it carefully as follows: "Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts."¹⁸

"We will not have this sort of thing," exclaimed Luther. We would rather not preach again ever than "to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts." And he continued: "We will not have Moses as ruler or law-giver any longer. Indeed, God Himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the

law. . . . Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. . . . Then I must have myself circumcised, wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus so, and observe all that stuff. So then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service."¹⁹

There is still more! Luther went on to say that when God said, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out, et cetera," He gave proof positive that "even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews." Therefore Moses is annihilated.

Luther had reached the limit in his attack on Moses. He was rough, but the following statement gives us a key to his manhandling of the great Hebrew leader: "The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver, unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. Therefore it is clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles."²⁰

And, as final proof, he again introduced the Sabbath commandment to establish fully that the law was given to the Jews alone. He ended his attack with this: "For not one little period in Moses pertains to us."

Having eliminated Moses, Luther then began to rehabilitate him. Moses should be read, not for "the commandments given to the people of Israel," which are "dead and gone," but for three things: He gave a number of laws that are still valid, such as tithing, the jubilee year, family advice, the Sabbath year, et cetera; he stated many "promises of God which sustain faith"; and he stated many examples of faith, and love, and of the cross. He ended the sermon by declaring, "for in Moses there is comprehended such a fine order that it is a joy to read."

It may seem strange that Luther should retain such purely Hebrew laws as the jubilee year and the sabbath year of rest for the land, while he eliminated the Ten Commandments, either outright or by reducing them to natural law, but the Reformer was not necessarily always logical.

In dealing with Moses as lawgiver, however, he was consistently severe. Elsewhere in his writings we meet with many harsh judgments. He called Moses "the minister of death," "the doctor of the treadmill," "the author of servitude," and "the minister of death, sins, and sorrow." In his comments on Psalm 45:2 he compared Christ and Moses in the following terms: "He [Christ] is not rough, severe, biting like Moses, who looks like the very devil and speaks in a way that our heart almost vanishes before him. For he has

lips overflowing with gall and wrath, that have been embittered with laurel and gall, in fact, with hellish fire. So away forever with Moses!"²¹

In one of his table talks Luther spoke of Moses and the law on the day of judgment, exclaiming, "I won't tolerate Moses because he is an enemy of Christ. If he appears with me before the judgment I'll turn him away in the name of the devil and say, 'Here stands Christ.' In the last judgment Moses will look at me and say, 'You have known and understood me correctly,' and he will be favorably disposed toward me."²²

And in another table talk he is quoted as saying, "When one is sorely tempted or is among the sorely tempted, let him strike Moses dead and heap the stones high over him. But when the temptation has passed, it is time to preach the law again so as not to add affliction to affliction."²³

We said earlier that a key to Luther's manhandling of Moses may be found in his feeling toward the sectarians who sought to revive the Mosaic law in its use in contemporary society. This view holds up to a point, but is not the main reason for his unreserved attack on Moses. This is found in Luther's concept of the function of the law in the work of justification. The law of God points out sin, Luther taught, terrifies the conscience, drives men to despair, and subjects the sinner to eternal death. The law is a tool to kill, and Moses is its user. Moses is an officer of death, while Christ is the bearer of life through the gospel.²⁴

Luther held that the law and the gospel belong together in the process of justification. One cannot exist without the other. Each complements the other. But these expressions can easily foster a complete misunderstanding of Luther's use of the terms law and gospel. He never placed them on a par or gave them equal validity. To him these two greatnesses in theology were deadly enemies in mortal combat throughout time. They represented God and Satan in the cosmic and universal struggle for man's soul. The two can never meet except in warfare.

Applied to his criticism of Moses as lawgiver this means that his use of the term "law" was synonymous with the proper noun Moses. The two words were used interchangeably, and so Moses became an emissary of sin, evil, and death, just as was the law in its function of pointing out sin.

This is the secret of Luther's rough treatment of Moses and the law. According to Luther's view the law accuses, condemns, kills; and Moses is the law in this terrible struggle, but he is necessary and inescapable, for a life of grace is a constant process of killing Moses and the law and of having victory in Christ daily. Therefore Luther could say that the Christian in temptation should kill Moses, that is, assert his liberty in his state of grace; and he could

also insist that Moses was necessary. In a remarkably clear passage in his preface to the Old Testament, Luther stated his distinction between the law and the gospel as follows:

"For by the law Moses can do no more than tell what men ought to do and not do. However, he does not provide the strength and ability for such doing and not doing, and thus lets us stick in sin. When we then stick in sin, death presses instantly upon us as vengeance and punishment for sin. For this reason St. Paul calls sin "the sting of death" (1 Corinthians 15:15), because it is by sin that death has all the right and power over us. But if there were no law, there would be no sin. Therefore, it is all the fault of Moses, who by the law precipitates and stirs up sin; and then upon sin death follows with a vengeance. Rightly, then, does St. Paul call the office of Moses a dispensation of sin and death (2 Corinthians 3:7) for by his lawgiving he brings upon us nothing but sin and death.

"Nevertheless, this office of sin and death is good and very necessary. For where there is no law of God, there all human reason is so blind that it cannot recognize sin. For human reason does not know that unbelief and despair of God is sin. Indeed, it knows nothing about man's duty to believe and trust in God. Hardened in its blindness, it goes its way and never feels this sin at all. . . . Besides reason does not know either that the evil inclination of the flesh, and hatred of enemies, is sin. . . . So it goes on its way, regarding its illness as strength, its sin as virtue, its evil as good; and never getting anywhere.

"See then! Moses' office is essential for driving away this blindness and hardened presumption. Now he cannot drive them away unless he reveals them and makes them known. He does this by the law, when he teaches that men ought to fear, trust, believe, and love God; and that, besides, they ought to have or bear no evil desire or hatred for any man.

"When human nature, then, catches on to this, it must be frightened, for it certainly finds neither trust nor faith, neither fear nor love to God, and neither love nor purity toward one's neighbor. Human nature finds rather only unbelief, doubt, contempt, and hatred to God; and toward one's neighbor only evil will and evil desire. But where human nature finds these things, then death is instantly before its eyes, ready to devour such a sinner and to swallow him up in hell."²⁵

As for Moses, whom he attacked and killed in various statements, Luther nevertheless held him in high esteem, praised him repeatedly, and gave him volumes of commentaries.²⁶ Here follows one statement, taken from Luther's tractate *From the Last Words of David* (1543):

"Finally, let us take Moses, the chief source, father, and master of all the prophets, and let us see if he would let himself become a Christian and support us while Christ baptized him in John 5 and said, 'Moses wrote concerning Me.' For if he wrote concerning Him, he most surely prophesied, preached, and commanded all the prophets after him to write and to preach of Christ, which they also did with all diligence, so that all Jews, young and old, know that a Messiah must appear. Finally, Moses was buried, but so that they do not know where he lies. However, we will set up two genuine legates and ambassadors and direct them to search, find, awaken, and bring him back. They are named John the Evangelist and Paul the Apostle. What will happen? They will find him and will not fail."²⁷

In this manner Moses was rescued from being completely an ally of Satan and sin in the controversy between good and evil in history. He will, Luther asserted, be found among God's elect.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. LW 40, pp. 79-223.
3. LW 35, pp. 157-174.
4. LW 40, p. 79.
5. LW 40, p. 82.
6. LW 40, p. 83.
7. LW 40, p. 84.
8. LW 40, p. 92.
9. LW 40, p. 93.
10. *Ibid.*
11. LW 40, p. 94.
12. LW 40, p. 97.
13. *Ibid.*
14. LW 40, p. 98.
15. LW 35, p. 162.
16. LW 35, p. 163.
17. LW 35, p. 164.
18. *Ibid.*
19. LW 35, pp. 164, 165.
20. *Ibid.*
21. LW 12, p. 211.
22. LW 54, No. 1242.
23. WA TR 2, No. 1371.
24. This has been stated well by H. Bornkamm in *Luther und das Alte Testament*, pages 123 ff.
25. LW 35, pp. 242, 243.
26. Volumes 1-9 in *Luther's Works*, as well as numerous sermons, are devoted exclusively to Moses.
27. WA 54, p. 55.

Sabbath



In his analysis of the Ten Commandments, Luther, as we have observed, gave two of them a special status; namely, images and the Sabbath. The last named is especially singled out for his comments because it was, he said, singularly a Hebrew institution, derived from Hebrew tribal custom and law. It was not a part of natural law, as were most of the other commandments.

Still Luther had a good deal to say about the Sabbath, and his remarks are by no means always derogatory of the Sabbath commandment.

The most derailed comments he ever made on this subject are found in his *Lectures on Genesis*, given from 1535 to 1545.¹ We meet his first remarks on the Sabbath in his exposition of Genesis 2:2: "And He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had made." Luther explains: "The Sabbath, or the Sabbath rest, denotes that God ceased in such a way that He did not create another heaven and another earth."² Then in his exposition of verse 3, "And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it, because in it He had rested from all His work," Luther begins a long comment on the Sabbath in Eden. First, he quotes Christ's words that "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath," and observes that Moses says nothing here about man or that the Sabbath was commanded to man, but rather "that God blessed the Sabbath and that He sanctified it for Himself." This meant that the Sabbath in particular should be devoted to divine worship, "for 'holy' is that which has been set aside for God and has been removed from all secular uses. Hence, to sanctify means to set aside for sacred purposes, or for the worship of God."³

Naturally, the relation of Adam to the Sabbath would be of capital importance. According to Luther, God also began the first church in Eden, and the

tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's church center, altar, and pulpit. How would he use them? Luther answers: "It follows, therefore, from this passage that if Adam had remained in a state of innocence, he nevertheless would have held the seventh day sacred. That is, on this day he would have given his descendants instruction about the will and worship of God; he would have praised God; he would have given thanks; he would have sacrificed, et cetera. On the other days he would have tilled his fields and tended his cattle. Indeed, even after the Fall he kept the seventh day sacred; that is, on this day he instructed his family, of which the sacrifices of his sons Cain and Abel give the proof. Therefore, from the beginning of the world, the Sabbath was intended for the worship of God."⁴

Then Luther continues to tell us what would have happened among Adam's descendants but for sin: "Unspoiled human nature would have proclaimed the glory and the kindnesses of God in this way: On the Sabbath day men would have conversed about the immeasurable goodness of the Creator; they would have sacrificed; they would have prayed, et cetera. For this is the meaning of the verb 'to sanctify.'"⁵

Luther then connects Sabbath keeping in Eden with the immortality of the human race; for Adam would have lived for a definite time in Paradise and would then have been carried off "to that rest of God which God, through the sanctifying of the Sabbath, wished not only to symbolize for men but also to grant to them. Thus, the physical life would have been blissful and holy, spiritual and eternal." Through sin we have lost that bliss of physical life and are in the midst of death even while we live, and yet, "because the Sabbath command remains for the church, it denotes that spiritual life is to be restored to us through Christ. And so the prophets have carefully searched those passages in which Moses intimates the resurrection of the flesh and life immortal."⁶

The Sabbath, then, shows that man was created for the knowledge and worship of God, "it was not ordained for sheep and cows but for men," that the knowledge of God might be increased. Man lost his knowledge of God; "nevertheless, God wanted this command about sanctifying the Sabbath to remain in force. On the seventh day He wanted men to busy themselves both with His Word and with the other forms of worship established by Him, so that we might give first thought to the fact that this nature was created chiefly for acknowledging and glorifying God."⁷

The Sabbath, according to Luther, was the connecting link between present and future life, a surety of immortal life. It was a distinct day, a sanctified day, and different from other days. Luther summarizes Adam's

Sabbath and non-Sabbath activities as follows:

"On the Sabbath he would have taught his children; through public preaching he would have bestowed honor on God with the praises which He deserved; and through reflection on the works of God he would have incited himself and others to expressions of thanks. On the other days he would have worked, either tilling his field or hunting. But this would have been far different from the way it is done now."⁸

In these comments one fact stands high. The Sabbath at its origin was a sanctified or holy day. Luther insists on this character of the day. It was a day for preaching and worship and praise. The Sabbath, says Luther, "has to do chiefly with demonstrating inner and spiritual worship, with faith, love, prayer, et cetera." The place for worship was the grove in Paradise where stood the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and here Adam and his descendants would gather on the Sabbath day. For the Paradise Sabbath was perpetually holy and intended for worship. Like life, it was perpetual; and so after the entry of sin, the Sabbath command remains to tell us that "spiritual life is to be restored to us through Christ."

Luther says that Adam continued after the Fall to be a Sabbath keeper. He also instructed his children to observe the Sabbath by sacrificing on that day. The practice became a tradition. It was a part of the Decalogue, which existed before Moses. Luther says of Abraham that he "waited for the commands of the Lord, also for the commands that pertained to morals. At the same time he observed the Decalogue, the rite of the Sabbath, and the law of circumcision."⁹ We observe that by the time of Abraham the Sabbath was a "rite," according to Luther, that is, an established order of worship. So certain is this that Luther can say, "Strictly speaking, however, the Decalogue and other laws that originated with the fathers are not Mosaic. Only those ceremonials that pertain to definite persons are Mosaic," and this legislation ended in Christ.¹⁰

Now, Luther understood that the Sabbath had been sanctified and hallowed before sin entered Paradise, and he could not forget this fact. It is a day of peace, tranquillity, and endless joy in worship, where the true church of God met in sinless adoration and praise. So Luther equated sinful acts with Sabbath breaking as he did in speaking about the building of the Tower of Babel. It was sin, it was blasphemy of the name of God, and it was "a violation of the Sabbath" to build the tower, and it became a seedbed of evils.¹¹

More often, however, Luther used allegory to explain the eternity of the Sabbath. Thus, in his comments on Genesis 8:22, "While the earth remain-

eth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease," he paused to explain that the statement, "while the earth remaineth" is not without purpose. It implies that "the days of the earth will come to an end and other days—of heaven—will follow." Then he added: "But when these days of the earth come to an end, everything will come to an end, and there will follow days of heaven, that is, eternal days, which will be Sabbath after Sabbath, when we shall not be engaged in physical labors for our subsistence, for we shall be like the angels of God."¹²

He returned to this mode of exposition in dealing with Genesis 45:22. Joseph was giving his brothers "festal garments," and Luther used the verse to explain how the earth, yes, the solar system, is not as splendid as it will be when God will adorn it with another garment. And Luther concluded: "In the same manner God also cleanses us from sins and frees us from death. This is the work of the six days of this world. But when these are past, when we have entered into His rest, then our torn and filthy garments will be changed into the garment of the eternal Sabbath."¹³

Luther's most elaborate statement on this aspect of Sabbath interpretation comes in connection with his comments on Genesis 17:10, 11. The subject is circumcision, and Luther finds it convenient to allegorize. He speaks of the seven ages or days, "during which the week of this finite life is brought to a close." The six ages take us from Adam to the end of the world. The seventh age is called the age of sleeping, and is so called because Christ rested in the tomb during the Sabbath. But there is also an eighth age which comprises the resurrection into eternal life.¹⁴

The eighth-age theory was invented by Christian theologians to allegorize the act of circumcision on the eighth day. "Circumcision was deferred to the eighth day," says Luther in approving the theory, "because in the resurrection, which is signified by the eighth day, we shall be perfectly circumcised, in order that we may be free from every sin of the world." Then he adds the allegorical application to Christ. "In all allegorical sense the eighth day signifies the future life; for Christ rested in the sepulcher on the Sabbath, that is, during the entire seventh day, but rose again on the day which follows the Sabbath, which is the eighth day and the beginning of a new week, and after it no other day is counted. For through His death Christ brought to a close the weeks of time and on the eighth day entered into a different kind of life, in which days are no longer counted but there is one eternal day without the alternations of night."¹⁵

This is Luther's end of the Paradise as well as the Mosaic Sabbath. Since Christ rested in the tomb during the entire Sabbath, there is only the eternal

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Sabbath of time for God's elect. Luther discards all distinctions among days in the New Testament dispensation. In his interpretation of Isaiah 66:23 he makes the prophet intend to say: "'From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath,' that is, there shall be a daily sabbath in the New Testament, with no difference as to time. We must be grateful to Paul and Isaiah, that they so long ago freed us from the factious spirits. Otherwise, we should have to sit through the sabbath day with 'head in hand' awaiting the heavenly voice, as they would delude us."¹⁶

Luther, of course, never doubted that the Jews must keep the Sabbath. It is their day, and they must observe it even into the future world. But he insisted also that they cannot keep it, because they have lost both their land and their city; so they cannot keep the law of Moses, which includes the Sabbath, and have not really done it for 1,500 years.¹⁷

In these various interpretations and uses of the Sabbath, Luther created what may not unjustly be called a theological odyssey of the Sabbath in human history. It began in Eden when God sanctified the seventh day, on which He had rested, and gave it to Adam for a holy day of sacrifice and worship. When Adam lost Eden through sin, he continued to worship on the seventh day and taught his sons likewise to worship on that day, and through them his descendants. Eventually the Sabbath was honored and kept by Abraham, but then it was associated with other rites, such as circumcision, and entered into Hebrew tribal tradition as a part of what Luther called the Decalogue, that is, the pre-Mosaic Decalogue, based, since the foundation of the world, on natural law. The Sabbath, he held, is not based on natural law; it is a tribal custom. This point was later most useful to him in his exegesis.

When Moses arrived as the Hebrew lawgiver, he took over this tribal tradition and placed the Sabbath in the Mosaic Decalogue. To be sure, Luther recognized that the Ten Commandments were all spoken by God, through an angel, and that they have a universal validity. But he failed altogether to include the second commandment in his own list. And he shortened the Sabbath commandment to read, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." "In itself," Luther explained, "it is a universal command for all the world. But the ornamentation which Moses gives it and makes it peculiar for his own people obligates no one especially except the Jews" to keep it.¹⁸

What the ornamentation is, Luther outlined carefully. "But that Moses should name the seventh day and say how God made the world in six days, hence, no one should work, that is ornamentation which Moses makes espe-

cially for his people and the time. For nothing like this is postulated earlier either with regard to Abraham or the times of the Fathers. It is an ornamentation made for the people who were led out of Egypt and was not to remain forever just as the entire law of Moses was not."¹⁹

Right here Luther inserts his interpretation of the true meaning of the commandment. It is preaching and teaching God's Word "which is the true and only meaning of this commandment." This has been its intent "from the beginning and will be until the end of the world." Then he says: "However, the seventh day does not concern us Gentiles, nor did it really concern the Jews any longer than until the Messiah."

Then he closes the argument by inferring that his own rendition of the commandment, namely, "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," is based on natural law, while Moses' ornamented text as found in Exodus 20: 8-11, was not. He continues: "But nature and necessity both force us to recognize certain days and hours for the preaching of God's Word, when man must be still and observe the Sabbath."²⁰

Luther returned to the idea that nature demands one day a week for rest. In a sermon in October, 1535, he told his congregation that Paul and the entire New Testament had abolished the Jewish Sabbath, so that the Gentiles need not observe it though it was "a stern commandment for the Jews."²¹

Then he spoke of the comparative importance of Saturday and Sunday. All days are alike holy in the New Testament, but one day is necessary for rest, "because everybody is not able to do without it continuously. Nature, too, demands that from each week one day be set aside for quietude for both man and beast. But whoever would make a binding command out of the Sabbath as an act demanded by God, must keep Saturday and not Sunday. For Saturday is commanded the Jews and not Sunday. Christians, however, have until now kept Sunday, not Saturday because Sunday is Christ's resurrection day. This is surely a sure sign that the Sabbath, yes, indeed, all of Moses does not concern us, or we would have to keep Saturday. And this is a great and strong proof that the Sabbath is abolished. For we cannot find a place in the entire New Testament where Christians are commanded to keep Sabbath."²²

"Why, then, do Christians keep Sunday?" Luther asked. His answer was most elastic: "Although all days are free and open, one like another, is nevertheless useful, good, and necessary to observe one, be it Sabbath, Sunday, or any other day, because God wants to rule the world orderly and peacefully. Therefore, He gave six days over to labor, but on the seventh day servants, day laborets, and all labors, even horse, ox, and other working animals, must rest

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and recuperate according to the commandment."²³

This was Luther's most elaborate statement on the problem of labor and rest. And he went on to say that if a person does not want to keep a certain day, he need not do so, for there is no binding commandment in our times, and "we will not hunt him down." The Jewish Sabbath was, indeed, changed into Sunday; but the true Sabbath is the spiritual one when we do truly spiritual deeds. This Sabbath Christ anticipated for us when He rested in the grave on the entire Sabbath. We cannot fully share this rest until death; in this life we can only anticipate it when the old Adam with his works, reason, desires, and lust dies within us.²⁴

This is the end of Luther's theological Sabbath odyssey. From its beginnings in Eden it wandered among Adam's descendants, now and then kept but mostly rejected. By the time of Abraham it was a rite and, like circumcision, was given to Abraham and his descendants. Although it retained a certain universal character from its Edenic origin, it was now primarily a tribal institution. Here Moses took it, embellished it into a weekly rest day, and made it, under God's guidance, a national Sabbath for all who were to live under the Mosaic code. Actually, however, this Sabbath ended with the Messiah and His rest in the grave on the Sabbath day; or, as Luther would have us believe, it fused with the "eternal Sabbath" of the eight-age cycle "when days are no longer counted but there is one eternal day" and one "eternal Sabbath."

Luther has been charged with "changing the Sabbath into Sunday." But the Reformer never arrogated such authority to himself. Indeed, compared with later advocates of Sunday stringencies, he was indeed liberal. In the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors* we find a list of holidays and Sundays which ought to be observed by the pastors. It is followed by this counsel: "Pastors should not make an issue of the fact that one observes a holy day and another does not. Let each one peacefully keep to his custom. Only do not do away with all the holy days. It would be well if there were some uniformity. Yet the people are to be taught that the only reason for keeping these festivals is to learn the Word of God. If one wishes to do manual labor, he may do so in his own way. For God requires observance of these church ordinances by us only on account of the teaching, as Paul says in Col. 2:16."²⁵

In Luther's time Sabbatarians did appear on the scene. Karlstadt advocated the use of the Mosaic code and wrote on the Sabbath. Luther referred to these dissenters several times. And Jewish rabbis had invited him to study Judaism. Against these he directed in 1538 his *Against the Sabbatarians*,²⁶ where he

said that the Jews had been without land, city, and center of worship for 1,500 years. If they could reestablish all that, then we, too, would take notice and become Jews. This could never happen, however, for the Messiah had ended it all, both for Jews and Christians.²⁷

Toward Karlstadt he was less generous, but could say: "Yes, if Karlstadt were to write more about the Sabbath, even Sunday would have to give way, and the Sabbath, that is Saturday, would be celebrated. He would truly make us Jews in all things, so that we also would have to be circumcised."

By this statement Luther in no wise endorsed Sabbath keeping. He simply wanted his readers to know that anyone who "observes the Sabbath [that is, whoever teaches that it must be kept], must also let himself be circumcised and keep the whole Mosaic law."²⁸

As for the real Sabbatarians, who had appeared principally in Moravia, he assumed generally an air of ridicule. In his lectures on Genesis he called them a nuisance. "In our time," he opined, "there arose in Moravia a foolish kind of people, the Sabbatarians, who maintain that the Sabbath must be observed after the fashion of the Jews." Then he added, "Perhaps they will insist on circumcision too, for a like reason."²⁹

And he found them in Austria where they had actually "tried to force men to observe the law of circumcision."³⁰ In his *Table Talk*, in 1537, he blamed the Jews for proselyting in Austria and for circumcising "many Christians," that is, making them Sabbatarians.³¹ He was an enemy of all heretics, something which he had been since his earliest days as a teacher of theology.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. LW 1, p. 79.
4. LW 1, pp. 79, 80. *Comments on Ch. 2:3.*
5. LW 1, p. 80.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. LW 1, p. 82.
9. LW 5, p. 20.
10. *Ibid.*
11. LW 2, p. 214.
12. LW 2, pp. 129, 130.
13. LW 8, p. 67.
14. LW 3, pp. 141, 142.
15. *Ibid.*
16. LW 40, pp. 93, 94.
17. WA 50, pp. 334, 335.

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18. WA 16, p. 478.
19. WA 50, pp. 333, 334.
20. *Ibid.*
21. WA 16, p. 477.
22. WA 16, p. 478.
23. WA 16, p. 478, 479.
24. WA 16, p. 480.
25. LW 40, p. 298.
26. WA 50, pp. 309-337.
27. WA 50, p. 324.
28. LW 40, p. 94.
29. LW 2, p. 361.
30. LW 7, p. 152.
31. LW 54, p. 239.

Man in Death

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In his lectures on chapter two of Genesis, Luther asserted that the Sabbath rest in Eden "implies the immortality of the human race." Had Adam not sinned "he would have been carried off to that rest of God which God, through the sanctifying of the Sabbath, wished not only to symbolize for men but also to grant to them."¹ Man's fall into sin did not, however, destroy God's plan for an eternal rest. The Sabbath remains and denotes that spiritual life is to be restored to man through Christ at the resurrection of the flesh with life immortal; indeed, God's giving us the Word and the Sabbath "clearly proves that there remains a life after this life and that man was created not for this physical life only, like the other animals, but for eternal life, just as God, who has ordered and ordained these practices, is eternal."²

Instead of life and immortality came sin and death. Some Luther students have held that death was the central theme in Luther's theology. His question in the monastery: "How can I find a gracious God?" and his struggle to find an answer, were alike prompted by his fear of sudden death. "Conscience and death are the two bridges that lead to eternity," and Luther feared to cross both of them. His life was one of deep melancholy with the shadow of death constantly near or hanging over him.³

Luther's theology of death gives us his answer. As he explained Psalm 90, he delved into the problem at length, stating flatly that death is the result of God's wrath. "The fact that we die is the result of God's indescribable wrath over sin."⁴ Man was created "to live forever in obedience to the Word and to be like God." Man was created for life, not for death. His death is a "genuine disaster," for it is not like the death of animals, which die "because of a law of nature," while man disobeyed God and suffers death as a con-

sequence of his sin.⁵ "It is He who causes man to die. It is He who plunges him from life into death." Just as man's life was of God's designing, "so death is the result of God's wrath."⁶

Death, then, so far as man is concerned, is more than a biological problem. Animals and vegetation on earth die in "a natural order" determined by God, but not so man. His death is an unending wail and wrath because he was created for eternal life in the image of God, and "the terrible horror of death" is determined upon him by the wrath of God for his transgression.⁷ "We are, therefore, as sheep to be slaughtered," and the devil is God's instrument "to afflict and to kill us."⁸

Indeed, man is worse off than all other things in nature. Vegetation and all living creatures die because it pleased God in His eternal counsel "to ordain that they should die," said Luther in his comments on Psalm 90:7. But man is driven forward because of God's wrath with relentless speed to destruction and to eternal death. We are consumed by His anger.⁹

In this terrible situation the Christians are tormented more than are evil men. They know that God is incensed because of sins, and so "Satan haunts them day by day with fears and the uncertainty of life."¹⁰ And Luther made Moses ask: "What . . . are we human beings whom Thy wrath slays?"

And Luther continued his argument: "Truly our death is not only more terrible than the deaths and miseries of all other living beings, but also more terrible than that of human beings. What of it when Epicurus dies? He not only does not know that there is a God, but also fails to understand his own misery which he is experiencing. Christians, however, and God-fearing people know that their death, together with all other miseries of this life, is equated with God's wrath. Hence, they find themselves warring and battling with an incensed God in an effort to protect their salvation. What miserable human beings we are, who, even before engaging in such warfare, are weighed down and distressed by the miseries of this life! Yet even if these did not exist, the fear of death alone would be a disaster frightful enough. No species of living beings is tormented by the fear of death the way man is."¹¹

Here Luther, it would seem, reached the nadir of pessimism and melancholy. But he did not remain there long. He was describing the sinfulness of sin, and he found it to be infinite, as infinite as God's wrath. Its magnitude is so great that the mind of man cannot encompass it. Sin is a secret, stupendous thing, as stupendous as the God who is offended by it. Moses, Luther said, wants us to know this and be terrified completely by it. When we have been utterly frightened, "we should sigh to God for mercy. Then we shall not be numbered among those who disdain God," but among those who by

God's grace hope for the "eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17)." ¹²

Sin is the cause, then, of all our miseries. However, sin is a hidden thing and must be made known to us. The instrument that apprises us of sin is the law of God. Actually, it is the law that beats and hammers us down to despair. Satan throws his darts at us by means of the law, as he incites us to seek out the reasons for God's dealing with us in this way and for His exhibiting all His power against us.

These are the darts of the devil and punishments of sin, which we are to repel with the shield of faith. Luther would not leave us in despair. There is hope for the Christian. Sin, which is hidden to us, is open to divine inspection and "fully known in the brilliant light of God's omniscience." ¹³ God gives eternal life at the resurrection of the dead, and the Old Testament contains many statements regarding "a future life which follows this life, a life in which either God's grace or God's wrath prevails." ¹⁴ And the Luther who had just said that the death of Christians was "more terrible than the deaths and miseries of all other living beings," even human beings, because they knew that their death is to be equated with the wrath of God, could now say in the light of the gospel: "But a Christian does not see or taste death, that is, he neither feels it nor is he frightened by it, and he goes easily and lightly into it as if sleeping and not dying. But a godless man feels it and is frightened eternally." ¹⁵ What, then, did Luther teach with regard to the state of the dead?

The papists had devised, asserted Luther, five places after death: (1) the hell of the damned, (2) the hell of infants who were not baptized, (3) purgatory, (4) the limbo of the fathers, and (5) the open heaven. He examined this topography and rejected all of it as "silly." Instead, he turned to Scripture for a solution.

In Scripture Luther found faith, both that of the fathers and our own, and faith is everywhere the same and teaches us that there remains another and better life after this one. It would be most shameful for Christians to doubt it because of the plenitude of light on the subject. However, he said, the Epicureans are doubters and are increasing in number, a certain proof of confusion and of approaching judgment. "For if I do not believe in a future life and a resurrection, why do I have need of God and a knowledge of Christ?" he asked, "Or how can I maintain that there is a God who punishes the wicked and does good to the pious? The denial of a future life completely does away with God, and thus we shall be altogether like horses and mules (Psalm 32:9), which do not trouble themselves at all either about death or

about life. And this can surely be observed in the case of the Epicureans.¹⁶ Christians, however, should firmly hold fast to the evidence of eternal life, which has come down from the beginning of the world.

In almost numberless statements throughout his writings, Luther spoke of sin, Satan, and hell; but when he actually came to the subject of death and man's state in death, he had relatively little to say about the lot of sinners. It was the saints that received his attention.

The first fact that arrests our attention in Luther's doctrine of the state of the saints in death, is that they sleep. In comments on Genesis 25:7-10, Luther gives a fairly complete view of his doctrine of man's state in death. "Abraham departed like any other human being, and Moses says that he died." Then Luther adds: "In all Holy Scripture this is the first passage which declares that the death of the saints is peaceful and precious in the sight of God (Psalm 116:15) and that the saints do not taste death but most pleasantly fall asleep."¹⁷

Luther speaks here of two opposites. Abraham died like any other human being and fell asleep. That is to say, as any human being he died; but as a saint he fell asleep. This Luther reiterates many times. In the eyes of the world the death of the righteous seems exceedingly sad, while actually they "are sleeping a most pleasant sleep." He continues: "When they lie down in their beds and breathe their last, they die just as if sleep were gradually falling upon their limbs and senses."¹⁸

Luther then asks two questions: "But where did Abraham go? Do people, then, still remain after this life?" Moses had answered the first by saying: "He was gathered to his people." Luther sees in this "an outstanding and notable evidence of the resurrection and the future life," a fact that should comfort all who believe in God.¹⁹ For we have a clear and extensive knowledge about death and life and are sure that Christ Jesus is waiting for us when we depart this life. He is the "Guardian of our souls (1 Peter 2:25), who receives us into His hands. He is our Abraham in whose embrace we take delight."²⁰

In this manner Luther introduces another angle to the problem of the state of the dead. The fathers of the Old Testament really did not die but were "gathered to their people," that is, as saints they were gathered to the fathers, and this will happen to all the righteous. "For in Christ death is not bitter, as it is for the ungodly—we do not pass from a pleasant life into a life that is unhappy, but we pass from afflictions into tranquillity. This should serve to comfort us lest we shudder at death."²¹

Christ called the place into which all the saints, Lazarus included, have been

gathered the bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22). Then Luther halts: "But how to explain or define this I leave to the judgment of anybody in accordance with each one's understanding."²² One thing is certain, he affirms: We should not retain "the bosom of Abraham" in the New Testament; there is no longer a bosom of Abraham after Christ's coming. He explains: "But the bosom of Abraham which holds and has embraced all the saints who died up to the death of Christ is the promise made to Abraham (Genesis 22:18): 'In your Seed all the nations shall be blessed.' Thus, the bosom of Adam was the promise given in Paradise (Genesis 3:15): 'The seed of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent'; and those who departed with faith in that promise were saved, because the Word of God is greater and more extensive than heaven and earth."²³

There are, then, in the tragic story of death, three periods or "bosoms" where the righteous repose in death. Of these, two are promises concerned with the Christ who would come; the third is Christ. All lie in the realm of individual faith in the Christ "who was born, suffered, was crucified, and rose again for us."

Luther understands that he is dealing with a controversial subject. So he deals with it "in order to forestall and put an end to the prying questions and discussions of others." How does he know anything about the state of souls after death? He answers by quoting the words of Christ in Matthew 22:32: "God is not a God of the dead, but of the living." "This," he continues, "makes it sure that our souls are living and are sleeping in peace, and that they are not being racked by any tortures."²⁴

He then quotes Isaiah 57:1, 2 (RSV used here): "Devout men are taken away while no one understands. For the righteous man is raken away from calamity, he enters into peace; they rest in their beds." Luther comments: "These are most extraordinary words. They clearly indicate the state and condition of the dead after this life. They enter, he [the prophet] says, not into death, purgatory, or hell; they enter into peace. And it is a great comfort when he says that the righteous are called away before calamity comes over Germany."²⁵

In another comment he describes the state of the righteous dead before Christ in these terms: "For the saints who believed the promise concerning Christ died in such a manner that after they had been called away from the troubles and hardships of this life, they entered their chambers, slept there, and rested in peace. This is true and clear."²⁶

So far Luther has only told us that souls live and rest in peace after death. But what kind of life or rest is this? He refuses to give us an answer

because the question is "too lofty and too difficult for us to be able to define it. For God did not want us to know this in this life. Thus it is enough for us to know that souls do not go out of their bodies into the danger of tortures and punishments of hell, but that there is ready for them a chamber in which they may sleep in peace."²⁷

In this connection he notes a difference between natural sleep in this life and that of the future life. In natural sleep one has no knowledge of any evil by fire or by murder. But the soul sleeps and is also awake all the while. It can experience visions and hear discourses of the angels and of God. From this he concludes that sleep in death is deeper than it is in this life, yet the soul lives in death, for God preserves the waking soul. In this way, God is able "to awaken Elijah, Moses, et cetera, and so to control them that they live. But how? We do not know." So Luther ends his unanswered question by saying: "The resemblance to physical sleep—namely, that God declares there is sleep, rest, and peace—is enough. He who sleeps a natural sleep has no knowledge of the things that are happening in his neighbor's house. Nevertheless, he is alive, even though, contrary to the nature of life, he feels nothing in his sleep. The same thing will happen in that life, but in a different and better way."²⁸

Luther closes his comments on the state of the dead, as called forth by the burial of Abraham, by indicating why he gives so much time to this particular event. It is "to curb unprofitable and idle thoughts about these questions." It is more than enough, he thinks, "to know that we depart safely and quietly into the bosom of Christ, that is, that those who rely on the Word and the promise escape afflictions and tribulations and enjoy everlasting peace and safety."²⁹

We see, then, that from beginning to end in his discussion of this problem, Luther is concerned with the righteous in death. They sleep in peace and tranquillity in their chambers; yet they live but know nothing. Time is, as it were, suspended during their rest; for with God time is not counted.

What of the wicked dead? Luther is very careful in his view of their status. He rejects, it seems, the traditional hell for the damned as a place of immediate punishment, because Scripture is not clear on the subject. His final judgment is: "But whether the souls of the ungodly are tortured immediately after death I am unable to affirm. . . . It seems that they, too, are sleeping and resting; but I am making no positive statement."³⁰ He is certain that they go to damnation, but, if immediately after death or not, he is not sure. "I leave this undecided."

It would seem strange if Luther did not, in connection with this theme,

mention the criminal in Luke 23:43. He does and gives the thief a place. The meaning of the words of Christ to the criminal is this: "Today you will be with me in Paradise; that is, in my bosom; where I am, you likewise shall be."³¹ Then he launches into a description of Christ's work in ordering and directing His church from heaven or Paradise, and concludes: "Therefore, there is a great difference between the sleeping saints and the ruling Christ. The former sleep and do not know what is going on. Nevertheless, they are resting."³²

Commenting on Ecclesiastes 3:19-21, where the writer insists that in death both man and beast have the same fate, Luther insists that beast and man are alike in the moment of death in the sense that neither knows when death comes, and man's moment of death is as uncertain as the beast's. The text has no reference to immortality, which the world can never understand anyway. Only God's servants understand, and they have ever lived in hope of a future life. The poets, like Lucian, have laughed this out; and the philosophers, like Aristotle, have denied it. Man can know this mystery only as a child of God; otherwise there is no difference between man and beast.³³

The incident of the medium at Endor in 1 Samuel 28 provokes Luther to make some poignant remarks. It cannot be good spirits that wish to tell us about the actions of the dead. A good spirit obeys the command of God, who does not want us to know what happens among the dead. Says Luther: "This is why the Holy Spirit Himself keeps this commandment of God so strictly that not a single instance of spirits of the dead is found in the entire Scriptures; indeed, they forbid believing these spirits. That Samuel was brought up by a medium or wizard was surely a specter of the devil, not only because the Scriptures in that place declare that it was done by a woman who was filled with devils . . . , but also because Saul and the woman when they inquired of the dead were clearly acting contrary to this divine commandment. Against this commandment the Holy Spirit cannot and may not act, nor let His saints act; nor yet help or approve those who do act against it."³⁴

So it would seem that Luther maintained a uniformly consistent argument on the subject of the state of the righteous in death. They sleep, rest, yet live in God's keeping. He could even say that they know nothing. However, in his letters and table talks he appeared in a somewhat different light.

On April 22, 1532, he wrote a Thomas Zink about the loss of his son John, a student at Wittenberg. Luther told the father that everything possible was done to save the boy's life, but "the disease got the upper hand and carried him off to heaven, to our Lord Jesus Christ." Luther continued:

"There can be as little doubt that he is with God, his true Father, in eternal blessedness, as there can be doubt that the Christian faith is true. Such a beautiful Christian end as his cannot fail to lead heavenward."³⁵

Justus Jones, his friend and colleague, had lost his wife, and Luther wrote to comfort him: "For your spirit has cause to rejoice when you reflect that this good and pious woman has been snatched from your side to enjoy eternal life in heaven. This you cannot doubt, for she fell asleep on Jesus' bosom with so many godly and blessed expressions of faith in Him. It was in this way that my daughter also fell asleep, and this is my great and only consolation."³⁶

How Luther felt over the loss of his own daughter, Magdalene, found expression in a letter to his fellow reformer, Andrew Osiander, on June 3, 1545. Osiander had lost both wife and daughter, and Luther wrote to comfort him on the "twofold cross" he had to bear. Then he referred to his own sorrow, which was so great. "It may appear strange, but I am still mourning the death of my dear Magdalene, and I am unable to forget her. Yet I know surely that she is in heaven, that she has eternal life there, and that God has thereby given me a true token of His love in having, even while I live, taken my flesh and blood to his Fatherly heart."³⁷

In these and in other similar statements Luther did not contradict this theology on the state of the righteous in death, but he did put a different emphasis on the subject. The dead really live; they have eternal life, something that Luther, as a theologian, always associated with the resurrection. As a spiritual comforter and counselor he was projecting the state in death beyond death and into "eternal blessedness." "You will not die," he said to his aunt Lena. "When morning dawns, you will rise and live forever."³⁸ He was speaking of the resurrection.

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3. Carl Stange, *Luthers Gedanken ueber die Todesfurcht* (Berlin, 1932), pages 6 ff.
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5. LW 13, p. 94.
6. LW 13, p. 97.
7. WA 39, II, p. 367.
8. LW 13, p. 97.
9. LW 13, pp. 106, 107.
10. LW 13, p. 112.
11. *Ibid.*
12. LW 13, p. 117.
13. LW 13, p. 118.

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14. LW 13, pp. 126, 127.
15. WA 17, II, p. 234.
16. LW 4, p. 317.
17. LW 4, p. 309.
18. *Ibid.*
19. LW 4, p. 310.
20. *Ibid.*
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23. *Ibid.*
24. LW 4, p. 312.
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26. LW 4, p. 313.
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29. LW 4, p. 314.
30. LW 4, pp. 314, 315.
31. LW 4, p. 316.
32. *Ibid.*
33. EA 21, p. 77.
34. LW 36, p. 196.
35. WA Br 6, No. 1930.
36. T. G. Tappert, ed. *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), page 76.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 80, 81.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 45-48.

Resurrection and Judgment

5

oever we may interpret Luther on man's state in death, one thing is certain: He clearly taught that immortality is God's gift to His saints and comes to them at the resurrection and not before. It does not come to the godless. Both the just and the wicked must rise and face the judgment. Here are his words: "Finally I believe in the resurrection of the dead at the last day, both the godly and the wicked, that each one may receive in his body what he deserves: the good eternal life with Christ, the evil eternal death with the devil and his angels. For I do not hold with those who teach that the devils will finally come to eternal life."¹

In the *Short Form of the Ten Commandments, Faith, and the Lord's Prayer* he defined his view thus: "I believe in a future resurrection of the dead, in which through the Holy Spirit all flesh will again be restored to life, that is, all men, good and evil, will live in the same body that died, was buried, decayed or disappeared in whatever manner."²

Clearly, Luther held that the resurrection will be universal. All must live and stand before God in judgment. As dead, they cannot receive the promised reward because they are as though they did not exist.

Because the two subjects were so closely related in his mind and treatment, it is difficult, indeed impossible, to discuss Luther's view of the resurrection without touching also his view on man's state in death. He conceived of death and resurrection as but moments apart in time. In a letter to his son John on February 15, 1530, he stated this most vividly. "For our faith is certain, and we doubt not that we shall shortly see each other in the presence of Christ. Our departure from this life is a smaller thing to God than my journey would be from here to Mansfeld or yours from Mansfeld to Witten-

berg. It is only an hour's sleep, and after that all will be different. This is most certainly true."³

The very close relation in time between death and resurrection is present in all of Luther's thought on this subject. When he was comforting his aunt Lena as she lay on her deathbed, he is reported as saying: "Your faith rests alone on the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . He is the resurrection and the life. You shall lack nothing. You will not die but will fall asleep like an infant in a cradle, and when morning dawns, you will rise again and live forever."⁴

It seems that at times he became overtaken and possessed by a desire to depart this life and be with Christ before the end of present life. Such a desire "befits Christians," he said, "who have been quickened, who have been raised up, and who sit in heaven with Christ, where we shall judge angels." These are all resurrection and after-resurrection activities which Luther projected himself into before actual death.

The important point to observe here is that Luther's thought was strongly eschatological in all its ramifications. The resurrection of Christ is the central article of Christian belief, he taught, and no Christian dare deny it because on this fact the whole gospel stands or falls. Whoever would deny Christ's resurrection must deny his own faith, the truth of Scripture, the fact of apostolic preaching, and the truthfulness of God; indeed, he must deny that God is God.⁵

The whole story of Scripture is founded and built on the fact of the resurrection of Christ, Luther affirmed. Adam heard of it and believed when God assured our first parents of the future Saviour. All the fathers and holy men in the Old Testament believed steadfastly, and in their faith overcame the powers and the wisdom of the world and of hell that challenged their faith. In this manner belief in a risen Christ was transmitted from generation to generation down to our day.⁶

Just as Christ's resurrection is the central fact in Christ's work as God and Redeemer, Luther taught, so His coming again on the last day is the final event in history for the righteous. In Luther's theology the second coming of Christ is an absolute necessity. There can be no resurrection of the dead, just as there can be no judgment, without the last day.

This cardinal point in Luther's thought has often been overlooked. His doctrine on the state of the dead has been given an emphasis that he never gave it. He could consign the soul of every righteous man to Adam's bosom, or Abraham's bosom, or Christ's bosom; but he never said that the soul therewith receives its reward in eternal life. Only the resurrection on the last day brings eternal life, when Christ makes the destiny of the dead

known to all, whether good or evil.

Luther did not think that God judges a man at the moment of his death; rather he visualized the soul sleeping in its chamber, whatever one may call it, awaiting judgment. It sleeps in the promises of the Word of God until it shall be made alive again on the last day. Then it will receive its body back but in a glorified form to live with Christ eternally. The certainty of this transformation from a passing, earthly state to a glorified, eternal state lies in the historical fact of Christ's resurrection. He arose; therefore the rest of the dead will also arise.

This is the significance of Luther's eschatological doctrine. He rejected the five contemporary topographic distribution centers for the dead completely. He restored the Biblical emphasis on a final judgment in the end of time. He made Christ the divine arbiter of man's destiny by reason of his death, resurrection, and second coming as Judge and Lord of lords. And he laid new emphasis on the article of belief that the dead shall rise again.

According to Luther, Christ's second coming at the end of the world will be visible, sudden, and unexpected. He will come with great power and glory, seated upon His throne of glory. He will judge both the living and the risen dead. He will separate the believers from the unbelievers, receiving the believers unto Himself and casting the unbelievers into eternal outer darkness.

These concepts of Luther will be understood more easily if we see them in his concept of time. If we do not interpret him thus, he will appear as confused and contradictory, certainly paradoxical. We have seen already that he likened the death of the righteous to a sleep. But at this point Luther gave up all chronology. Between death and resurrection, time is like a moment. So Luther could say that the souls of the righteous sleep in their chambers, or in Christ's bosom, or in the promises of the Word, or without knowledge of anything, or in the eternal peace of Christ—as he said of himself, "We will sleep until He comes and knocks on the little tomb and says: Doctor Martin, arise! Then will I arise in a moment and be eternally happy with Him."⁷

But he could also picture the moments between death and resurrection as being full of activity. Of his fellow reformer, Urbanus Rhegius, he wrote: "We should rest assured that he is blessed and has eternal life and eternal joy in Christ's presence and in the church in heaven, since he now learns, hears, and sees with his own eyes the things which he here handled according to God's Word."⁸

In his discussion of eschatology, or last things, Luther was preoccupied

with the fate of the righteous, but he did not forget the wicked dead. They, too, sleep, but where and how, he declined to say. That they arise on the last day to receive their final sentence is certain. For them the judgment day is a day of anguish and terror. Their sentence brings them "eternal woe and weeping; ours, however, eternal joy."⁹

These statements by no means exhaust Luther's view on the end of the wicked. In a comment on Psalm 10, he asserted that "all the godless will perish," and he could say that the "godless who dedicate their souls daily to destruction, though to their fellowmen they bloom and carry on with much glory and surfeiting; yet they will at last join perdition in soul and body and will drink the cup in eternal death."¹⁰ This is specific language; the godless will perish. In a statement made in 1520, he said: "I believe that after the resurrection there will be eternal life for the saints and eternal death for the sinners."¹¹

What did he mean by "eternal"? He used the term often without elucidation, but in a comment on Christ's death on the cross, he said: "Behold, then, the heavenly sight of Christ, who for your sake descended to hell as forsaken of God, as one eternally damned when he cried, 'Oh, My God! Oh, My God! Why hast Thou forsaken Me!'"¹²

This can mean only that in the moment that Christ spoke these words, Luther believed, Christ experienced eternal damnation; in fact, Luther said in another passage that the moment that Christ said, "My God! My God!" He felt that He was eternally damned. Now, of course, this was not a matter of continuous time but of a moment.

Luther, then, when he spoke of eternal death did not necessarily deal with duration of time but of the condition of being forsaken by God, which is something so fearful and terrifying as to be destruction and eternal death. It takes place after the judgment when the wicked see God in divine glory and acknowledge that all His judgments, as executed by Christ, are completely valid and just. It is a moment of utter and eternal despair.

Luther explained this condition in his comments on Psalm 21:9: "Thou shalt make them as a fiery oven in the time of Thine anger: the Lord shall swallow them up in His wrath, and the fire shall devour them." After explaining that the verse must be given a spiritual interpretation and must apply to the last torments, he said: "The outward fire is nothing in comparison with the inward, so that they are rightly likened to a fire-oven or a burning oven that inwardly glows and burns. Thus Abraham (Genesis 19:28) saw Sodom and Gomorrah as smoke from an oven. And this unbearably high punishment God brings upon them with the sight of his face, that is, with

the revelation of His anger, as it says (Vulgate) here: 'At the sight of Thy countenance they are made into a fire-oven.' So it reads also in 2 Thessalonians 1(:9): 'Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power,' and Psalm (34:16): 'The face of the Lord is against them that do evil, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.' Such punishment no man can fathom, except the sinners, who experience it. Therefore, it is terrifying even to consider this verse because it describes them so exactly. I know of no other word in the Old Testament that describes so accurately the misery of the lost."¹³

The fact is that Luther in these comments had in mind particularly the Jews that crucified Christ, and for whom Christ prayed: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." This does not exclude the probability that sinners who may know what they are doing should be included in the broad sweep of the Reformer's language.

The problem of the wicked in the last judgment may be clarified further when we bear in mind that Luther used the terms "death" and "hell" interchangeably.¹⁴ They were both the same in his usage. Further, he employed such terms as "Adam's bosom" and "Abraham's bosom" to identify the gathering and resting places of the godly in the Old Testament. There they slept in the promise of a coming Saviour; but, with the resurrection of Christ, Abraham's bosom ended and Christ's bosom began.¹⁵

How careful Luther was in dealing with the state of the dead, even the godly dead, is seen in his comments on John 11:1-44. Lazarus had been dead, that is, Luther believed, resting in Abraham's bosom, four days when Jesus restored him to life. Luther understood that this miracle gave him a remarkable opportunity to elaborate on the subject of death and its meaning. This is how he used it: "Come, now, whosoever is nosy and eager to know how matters stand with the dead. For many would gladly have asked Lazarus what he did, thought, felt, and saw there, since he lay in the grave four days (John 11). Others also would fain know about other dead whom Christ, the prophets, and the apostles have raised from the dead. There were also certain frivolous babblers who put down in writing how they saw such horrible things that they could never be merry again as long as they lived. Yet others let the matter stand with the word in Wisdom 2: 'None has ever returned from the dead to tell us what happens there.' I, however, will let Lazarus and the other dead alone and abide by the Scriptures which say: 'They sleep.' For it seems to me that such sleep is so deep that they feel nothing, and see much less than one would feel in natural sleep, and when they are awakened, it will be certain that they do not know where they have been."¹⁶

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This, in Luther's theology, is the condition of the dead when Christ calls them forth on the last day for judgment. The righteous will then be given everlasting life in eternal light with God; the unrighteous will experience the unutterable agony of banishment from God's presence into everlasting darkness and death with Satan and his angels. The concept that Satan will be saved eventually Luther rejected completely.

In Luther's thought the judgment is not only the end of the controversy between good and evil in history, it is also the end of history itself. There will be no more time at all as we know it; all will be eternity. The earth will be purified by fire in all its parts, only to be recreated by God's word in all its parts but without the possibilities of evil. Everything will be renewed. This is Luther's teaching on the significance of Christ's resurrection and His second coming. God again will turn Creator and restore all His creation to its original status.

Just how God's new creation will appear or look, he never attempted to describe. "About eternal life we know as little as an unborn babe knows about its beginnings," said Luther, and so he closed his argument.

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5. WA 36, pp. 524, 526.
6. WA 36, p. 529.
7. WA 37, p. 151.
8. WA 53, p. 400.
9. WA 36, p. 555.
10. WA 5, p. 367.
11. WA 7, p. 220.
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